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# The Milkman's Dead

51 229 words

Creative writing masters

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# Chapter 1

The jewel of East Yorkshire is famous for Britain's tallest man. Seven feet, nine inches tall and his name was William Bradley. Since his death in 1820 the town, Market Weighton, has established a video shop, two fish shops and a healthy base of rumour concerning the arrival of a Tesco. The only store that regularly turns a profit sells a contraption that lowers elderly people into tepid baths. My Gran has an account there.

Once I peel off the motorway my behemoth feels too wide for the town's roads. I creep along under the speed limit as my father would have done. With the windows tight I watch the faces of townsfolk. One man straightens as I drive slowly past, pulling the kink out of his wretched posture before collapsing into a rampant shake of the head.

If there's a collision I'll barely notice the violence. A small town couple will endure spinal fractures, head wounds, and plough their Fiat into the duck pond. My air bags will deploy and I'll roll around as if on a giant bed of pillows. The birds will flap, but be tame enough, from considerate breadcrumbs, to not cause a fuss. When the police arrive at the scene they'll see the black BMW, the one they believe they have captive back at the station, courtesy of the arrest. It has clearly escaped, they'll think, to desecrate their heritage. Because, you see, my father and I drive identical cars. Well, almost. Both gear sticks are stained with ash from aimless flicking. Both have manual transmission with clutches that bite too late. But I inherited a lesser, older version than the one the jury will see.

I drag my lesser vehicle into the cul-de-sac and graze easily over a speed bump. This car, or my father's more recent model, would certainly obliterate bone. If you were to drive over a man's foot you would at least fracture the arch.

I suddenly have an inclination to delay my arrival and spend the afternoon in one of the pubs along the high street. I can ponder the facts of the trial while draft ale fills my cheeks. There is not a chance that he's guilty. I don't believe it for a second. I've been supporting this man since I was a boy. When my parents argued I would always defend my father's corner. I would threaten to stop eating until my mother forgave him. He isn't going to jail. The whole scandal will be laughed out of court.

At the bottom of her cul-de-sac I park in my Gran's drive. We were up in Market Weighton a year ago with our new-born baby and my wife Marie became worried about the sanitation of my Gran's house. She said effluent from the dog and budgie was spread across every surface like hot butter on toast. When pushed, I was inclined to agree that there was a mild re-heated odour. We eventually checked into a Bed & Breakfast at 40 pounds a night for a double room. The light-fittings buzzed and kept us awake. The dimmer switches were faulty, I think.

But this time, for the trial, Marie told me to come up here. She believes father relationships are important because she reads magazines, and not people. She packed my suitcase and massaged me into the car. We share the same toothbrush so she specially bought me a new one with a diamond head. I noticed in myself mild excitement at the prospect of securing one privately for

the week because she brushes her teeth five times a day and frays the brushes so they resemble a comically flattened spider.

The car pings in protest: my seatbelt has been unbuckled with the engine running. I check my appearance in the flap-down mirror. My eyes are bloodshot from the air-con. My hair is flat. The point on my forehead is so pronounced I'm establishing a Mohawk.

I slide the grate of the mirror closed – the tiny light goes out – and steady myself for a few seconds. I don't know how my Gran and her husband are going to perceive my father's innocence. I need to push through this, I think, as quickly as possible.

My Gran's front door is unlocked. The handle is a child's size in my palm. I feel like a giant. The *psssst* of the air freshener is the first line of attack, one of several dotted liberally across my Gran's bungalow. They excrete potent spittle every seven to eight minutes.

I hear the television blaring in a back room. This is how she got robbed last year: the noise gave a signal of where not to go. If I was a salesman I wouldn't be allowed in here even if I knocked. You can't sell to the over 80s door-to-door anymore, it's illegal. They don't trust OAPs to spend their own money or answer their own front door.

I call out, needlessly ducking my head. The mass of side boards, photos and religious iconography shrinks the hall, hemming me in. There's the glow-in-the-dark St. Christopher that was brought back from Lourdes in France for my Grandfather James. The statue is proud on the telephone table, next to the

empty receptacle of Lourdes holy water. The water is intended to heal the sick and the wretched.

I edge towards the lounge, not wanting to cause alarm. Each cream surface from the phone to the light switch has been shaded a nicotine yellow. The heat prickles at my cheeks.

The television is so loud that even when directly behind her there is no acknowledgement of my presence. I grew up thinking that I was difficult to understand, but then I later realised that my grandparents were deaf and inattentive.

I chance a booming hello and she looks up from her book – not concerned with the television in the slightest. My Gran is firmly rooted: she has her feet up, the veins able to shine through her stockings like a blue, scrambled tube map.

“Oh,” she says, startled.

“Hello Grandma,” I say. When I stoop down to kiss her on the cheek I inhale the perfume, the make-up, the liquor and the whiskers. This is the first time I’ve seen her hair neglected to grey instead of being doused with a chestnut rinse.

“Would you like a cup of something, or a sherry perhaps?” she enquires.

Herb, my step-Grandfather, is a well-trained butler. He hefts himself up and shakes my hand. His face is a badly stitched together balloon animal which refuses eye-contact, but this isn’t from the shame of the accusations made against my father.

By design I give too much eye-contact. I have to be vigilant. I'll stare you through flirtation (60 to 80 percent) right into aggression (80 to unflinching).

"Biscuit?" he asks.

"No thanks."

"They're Marks & Spencer's," he urges. The brown woollen cardigan is stretched tight over his relatively broad shoulders.

"Go on. Have one darling," my Gran says, waving me on. I've been chewing gum to spark an appetite. I've missed three consecutive meals. So I remove my gum discreetly and agree to the biscuit. It's nutty and ginger, designed so for a few seconds you think of nothing else. "And what would you like to drink, dear?" my Gran asks.

"I'd love a cup of coffee," I say to Herb, focusing on the dry skin on his forehead. He leaves the room and scrapes the door shut to keep the heat in.

"How are you, Grandma?" I ask. My Gran sighs and gurgles like a roast lamb allowed to rest before it's carved up and eaten.

"I could do with a new pair of legs, darling," she says, bent forward slightly on the faded settee. The pastels have frayed exactly behind her knees. I've heard that she is keeping more to herself, shying from the townsfolk. For a woman who has nominally ruled the roost in this town it is a perverse comeuppance to be on the other side of the gossip circuit. And her eyes, grown beady from the years of dozing, are stretched open and beg for me to initiate a change.

"Worse things happen at sea though, don't they Grandma?" I say. This platitude settles her and she slouches into the settee.

I fiddle with my phone, scrolling through the menus to check if there's a message or e-mail from the office.

My Gran's smile is fixed. I lock the phone's keypad and rub my hands – they are slimy in the heat of the lounge.

My father had the option of bail, but he chose to stay incarcerated. Once the hoopla of tea and biscuits has been cleared away I need to ask my Gran why. It certainly had nothing to do with a lack of money.

“How's your Mum?”

“Fine. Fine. Plodding along,” I say.

“The roads are terrible, aren't they?” my Gran says, dragging her vowels.

“Not too bad,” I say, “In that car.” I look out proudly at how the BMW is crouched and ready.

“Oh, lovely,” she says.

The last time my father went to prison he was arrested exactly where the BMW is parked now. It was on a drug dealing charge when he was 21 – before I was born. The judge gave him two years, but he managed 18 months with good behaviour. A milkman by trade, he'd sneak a joint of marijuana in with two bottles of semi-skimmed. Middle-aged men and women across Market Weighton could probably still remember the Drug Dairy. His weed was home-grown in the attic. My Gran and Grandfather had no intention of confirming their suspicions by folding out the metallic ladder and climbing into the roof. Mostly my father handed the drugs out for free, but as compensation he shifted more



milk than any other man in East Yorkshire. His round was on commission so he turned a reasonable profit. The dogs responded well to the smell of his hand.

The police arrived at five in the morning as my father was leaving on his milk float. The marijuana was already rolled and tucked next to their buyers' respective pints. Still groggy, he didn't catch sight of the police until they'd circled the float. They dragged my father over the tough, cable grass, but he managed to break free and toss a pint towards the house. The glass explosion narrowly missed my Gran, splattering the porch white.

She'd come out dressed, her make-up in place – a process that could take 45 minutes – aware that she'd be seeing police officers that morning. My Gran had reported him to the policeman who had helped her unclog the gutters the previous winter. She'd removed her glasses, leaving her powdered face in a permanent squint, believing this myopia more attractive than spectacles.

According to the family's official account of the story, my Gran wept slightly as they folded him into the police van. Her face powder streaked into a white translucent mess so she blended with the porch.

The float was left in the driveway and no one got their milk that day until after 10 o'clock. The marijuana was confiscated.

My pocket vibrates and I step out into the thankfully cooler hallway.

I stare at my wife's name flashing on my mobile until it beats to a stop, showing a missed call.

It's taken five weeks for my father to come to trial. During this time my wife has insisted on reminding me of every juicy piece of gossip she knows

about my father. Of course, she gathered this information from me over the years, but it's as if she has been building a case against him. She doesn't care for my thoughts on the arrest, because she's already decided that he's guilty. My wife assures me that all she is doing is reiterating my own stories back to me. I've humoured her, mostly, but I want to know what she hopes to achieve by proving his criminality to me. It seems cruel of her. This problem will be argued for a judge and blared out in court, rather than discussed further in our kitchen.

I phone my wife.

"How are you holding up?" Marie asks.

"You know? Fine," I say.

"Has the town turned against him?" she asks, with a surreal brashness which feels as avoidant as Gran and her biscuits.

"Not yet," I say.

"Do you want to speak to our daughter?" she asks. A father-daughter chat involves floating the receiver, not next to Ewa's ear, but above her crib.

My biggest fear, when my wife said she was pregnant, was that I would no longer be the centre of her attention. I knew we'd contrive dinner dates with paid-for baby sitters, but the quiet seconds of attention wouldn't be mine. Those busily isolating moments at parties when you sneak a glance at each other – they would belong to the child now. And the kicker was I knew I wouldn't want it differently. The kid was my priority too and the mother's attention could only help the child's development, but a part of me would be jealous, horribly so. I predicted this and it made no difference: now it's here.

“Love you,” I say into the phone, clueless about its effect. When Marie and I exchange “I love yous” it’s not that the words are pointless or defunct; it’s that our meanings are incongruent. In our house love is a spectator sport. Marie and I spend nights watching strangers on television use the word and express physically what the censor will allow. If we each had a specific phrase for our nuance it would be more accurate but we’d never feel synchronised. There would be a jostling for one of us to win.

I say the three words again: slower this time, trying to evoke comfort in my daughter.

Inside the heat, Herb has brought my coffee. I can’t cure my Gran’s multiple sclerosis or her addiction to diazepam or her agoraphobia and I can’t get her son a girlfriend or bring him out of jail, but I can gratefully drink her coffee.

I take it black from years of forgetting to buy fresh milk and sparring with expiration dates. Eventually, I learnt to prefer the bitterness of black coffee rather than risk it tasting curdled.

“Would you like to go and feed the chickens?” my Gran says, putting in a nod as if to persuade me, the white powder flaking from her furry cheeks. “Herb would go, but you’re here now,” she says, “and you can see the hutches, can’t you?”

My Gran looks terrified, goat-like. Her green eyes tinged yellow. She’s begging me not to ask about the trial, not directly. I can feel my patience unravelling. Without it I will be alone and frustrated. At the moment I can bash

against my sense of obligation, but it won't endure. I slump into the artificial apathy.

"Of course, that would be lovely," I tell her and shovel sugar into my mug. The liquid isn't warm enough to dissolve the granules. "Joyce will be through in a minute," my Gran says.

Aunt Joyce is my father's sister. There's a nine year gap between the siblings, which puts her at 48, but her hair is a terrific, stark white. "That's a lovely coloured jumper you've got on, isn't it," my Gran says, reaching for a topic.

"Yes?" I say, landscaping my chin into my neck to peer down. My Gran looks at me suspiciously.

"You can see that it's blue can't you darling?" she asks

"Hmmm," I say, nodding as if I'm cataloguing away the information. I don't pretend to be colour blind exactly, but I exaggerate the affliction.

I was tested in primary school. The quiz was a mess of dots and administered by the nurse who, a week before, had cupped my tiny testicles. True or not I'm so acclimatised to the habit of being colour blind that I honestly can't distinguish blues from greys or reds from browns. I could, possibly, take an educated guess if no one else was watching. But during stress I want people, even my Gran, to know that I'm different in here. I'm struggling.

"Do you like Joyce?" my Gran asks, sounding worried.

"Yes, of course I do," I say, wary that my Gran will begin conversations like this simply because she can't bear the silence.

“I love her very much,” she says, sounding almost like she’s defending against an accusation I’ve made. Her son, even when on the brink of conviction, is still her favourite. “She’s very bubbly, but she never sleeps here. She complains that the bed is too soft.”

I see a navy Ford, out in the driveway, trying to huddle under the rear bumper of the BMW. A woman in a uniform of denim – dressed like an eighties Madonna, but as old as the singer is now – gets out.

“I’m sure the beds are fine,” I say.

My father forced Joyce to polish his shoes every morning until he left school at 16. She would crouch in her chequered skirt and thermal tights on the kitchen lino. When she had the boots glistening she could get off her hands and knees and eat her toast.

I stand up to let Joyce in, forgetting that the front door isn’t locked.

“Chuck,” she says as we scrunch into the hall through adjacent doors. This was my name among family members when I was a kid.

I cock my head and ask if she’d like to go and feed the chickens.

“Is that the plan?” she says, looking from side to side as if to see another option. The dog Louie, in a skittish fizz, has a go at lapping her.

“He’s not exactly Prince is he? Do you remember? You used to pull on his ears something rotten?” she says. This is when I was a toddler, I imagine.

Joyce lowers her hand, but keeps it a few inches too high for contact so the dog leaps and spasms. My intentions for this trip were to see my father, sign off my appearance at the trial and go home. Engaging with Joyce is to spar with a volatile past. I’m suspicious of her, like I paid entry to sit and mind the kids

and now I'm being dragged on the rides. The dog is circling in on itself, distressed. It must be in a sugar-charged frustration. Herb feeds the runt chocolate, exclusively from his hand, with little other nourishment. It has a permanent brown smear around its mouth. It snuffles at Joyce's ankle. I look down and want to scrape the snot out of its black, marble eyes.

Finally, the dog makes contact with Joyce's hand. After such teasing she immediately straightens and walks into the kitchen. She squirts Fairy Liquid and lathers her palms, closing the tap with her elbows.

"Is Mum around," she asks, as if my Gran could be at the bottom of the garden, tending the petunias, when the poor lady is sealed on to her plastic seat lining.

With her manicured nails wet, Joyce glances around for somewhere to dry them. Eyeing a stained dish cloth she opts to rub them against her denim trousers. She made sure I saw her distress and perhaps would have used the cloth if I wasn't here.

Herb enters the kitchen with a tray of dirty cups. Joyce greets her step-father. The affection is functional because if Herb wasn't here pouring the sherry then who would be? Not my father. Joyce knows she's the only candidate.

There is a well-buried resentment shown briefly with the picking at a thread which has sprouted from Herb's cardigan. His inherited clothes are stuffed to capacity.

"It's just a little something," Joyce says handing over to Herb a thin oblong box still in its carrier bag. The old man pulls out a paint-by-numbers set.

The picture is of Tower Bridge. An eight-year-old boy with a *Beatles* mop-top is using the six paints included in the set to brush the monochrome into a twinkling scene.

“Thank you. Thank you,” he says. Herb is truly excited at the prospect of commanding London’s skyline in his home. Joyce’s actions are courteous, but she can’t disguise a smug manner as Herb blusters. The fact that she can inflict happiness in this man from such a childish gift affirms to her the right to be angry. He needs entertainment designed for a six-to-nine-year-old and so can be regarded as an unworthy replacement with a clear conscience.

When I think of this display and Joyce rubbing her damp hands dry for attention I want to panic. She isn’t as removed as she thinks. She’s not in a position to help with the trial’s perspective. She has my father’s nose, the nostrils expanding every year like those augmented Goth ear-rings.

I hurry after Joyce in to the lounge. She bends down to give her mother a hug hello.

“Will you take Charles to feed the chickens darling?” my Gran asks.

“I’m sure Chuck can take himself,” she says, turning back to catch my eye. I’d like to think that talking to my Gran like she’s a child is a new development since the arrest, but it’s entrenched to the point where she must have forgotten how her life was before. “But I’ll go with him, if he likes.”

Joyce is checking around the room. “Things have regressed,” she whispers to me. I want to be polite yet firm and say that this whispering aligns me with her in an uncomfortable way. We are not partners, I want to say, but I smile.

Suddenly Joyce walks past me with a brisk sense of purpose to get to the bathroom. “It’s you and me, kiddo,” she calls out. She’s set herself up as the family’s commander, but there’s a horrible falsity to her. She’s ill-equipped, her presence disorientating.

I hear her struggling to remove the huge plastic top clipped across the bowl. It’s so my Gran can sit down easily. It’s not often removed as Herb is content to splash.



## Chapter 2

We pass St. Mary's church. The fixed patches on the roof scream out against the original grimy squares. Joyce sits as a passenger with her hands bundled in her lap. Her briefcase had space for a plastic bag of chicken feed.

I have never prayed for my father, but I have accepted that he's sick. I have often imagined my father's skull as a flower pot of captured slugs, squelching and twisting around. He has lesions on his brain and a slug poking up for light or food feels like the most appropriate image for how he survives as a whole. My father will do what it takes to satisfy his basic needs. Marie's catchphrase now, when asking about my father, is to say: "What do the slugs say?"

This church, St. Mary's, had my father on their prayer roll longer than anyone else, including the ones with terminal cancer. Actually, especially them because what he has can't kill him.

Since the arrest, St. Mary's has removed my father's name from their prayers. What he did to my mother by abandoning and abusing her, and by association to me, is apparently forgivable by the church, but his recent, alleged, clearly fabricated misdemeanour is not.

By passing St. Mary's I feel a great deal of resentment towards my father that I thought I'd long since forgiven.

Joyce points a finger up from the chicken grain. There are white line scars on her knuckles. This is the only direction she gives during the short trip.

My daughter Ewa's first words were "turn right". She learned the phrase from the GPS system while sitting in her fake-sheepskin baby seat. Despite me deriding people who chat to their cats and dogs, I explain every movement and thought I have to the baby. It's like I'm training it to love my voice. Though she's built up a sporadic vocabulary, no other directions have stuck. I suppose, once she can properly talk, I'll have developed an instinct so her words will act as a soundtrack for the body language I already understand. Still, I'm looking forward to the time when she can chatter away, read maps and tell me where I should be going.

I turn another left into my father's road. His cottage is surrounded by grassland and the plot next door has been bought, but construction is pending.

Joyce tells me that three vehicles, a total of six officers, escorted him from the premises. I leave an imprint of tyre marks not far from where the police left their own.

Joyce produces a key from the briefcase. I skim a finger along the red disabled railings. My Gran insisted that the cottage have safety features, and paid for them. Though, once an agreement was reached she stayed in the car during her visits.

The cottage is from a fairytale: rickety at its foundations and cemented with gingerbread. The décor crosses the sentiments of a teenage boy with those of the Unabomber. Joyce steps deliberately over the chequered floor of CDs – making her way to the kitchen. Her neck veins are bulged rigid from having to hold her mask up.

The policemen took their time sifting and trashing – hoping to find a Roman Polanski movie, or a Gary Glitter album. As if a hint of pop-culture could act as an indicator for the crime. There's a spread of *Beatles* vinyl with encrusted muddy boot-prints. There's the original cover of "Yesterday and Today" before it was censored. The albums for artists A to C were kept upstairs so these have been flung a fair way.

There's a conspicuous space, a vacuum amongst the mess, where I rest a few vinyl. This space is where the computer must have been. I hear Joyce unlock the back door. I wish I could spend the week tidying the cottage rather than going to visit my father face-to-face.

When composed, the lounge is plastered with CDs, guitars, sheet music, movie posters and dozens of carefully selected newspaper cuttings with sections underlined, crossed-out and highlighted. The stories are on drug possession, freedom of speech, Islamic attitudes to women. There's a puff piece from GQ on how the British man is being emasculated. My father has few visitors, so this tinkering is exclusively for his own amusement. It's an industrious solitude with no distractions. His solemn wish is for the world to stop shouting at him. People are incredible noise for my father.

"Did he know the police were coming?" I ask, but Joyce has already gone out into the garden.

I walk through the kitchen – my father uses tea leaves and a strainer, so this tea mud gets into every crevice of his kitchen. It blocks his drains.

I see Joyce slapping down handfuls of grain for the chicks that have rushed out, as if they're worried and eager for news.

There's a desolate BMW in the centre of the garden: an old red three series. My father has sealed every seam and filled it with water. The level has dropped a good couple of inches from evaporation. It's a momentous project of care and, judging by the cramping of dead fish around the sunroof, Herb's feeding over the past five weeks has been sporadic. They swam across the gear shift and ducked in and out of the steering wheel. If any are still alive you can't see them through the murk. I edge closer and ask Joyce again.

"Did my Dad know that the police were coming to raid his house? Did he get any warning?"

"Your father doesn't believe he has done anything wrong," she says, not looking up. She lets the grain sift through her fingers. The Botox has paralysed her face in a far more symmetrical, beautifying way than the stroke has done to my father's features.

The grain disappears into the uncut grass. I want to suggest we pour it on the tiles or into a trough, but Joyce doesn't look like she needs more correcting and if a chicken can't find its own grain then it'll have to starve.

Joyce must be right: if my father had suspicion of warrants and interrogation he'd have removed the hydroponics plantation he was producing in his loft. Giant industrial fans had been drying tanks of high potency super-skunk.

I look up for a distraction and see the smashed top bedroom window. Kids had chucked a brick through the window last month. The brick through the window disturbed the hydroponics. This was why my father had needed new bulbs, which became a reason for him being in York on the day in question.

He said his fury motivated him to build an extended and higher fence between him and his neighbour, to no objections.

My father believed this vandalism was because kids were crooks and the world was falling apart. But it was because of how he looked: like a man who will be genuinely hurt if attacked. Children can't unravel this, but they are astute enough to sense a man who has nowhere to vent his frustration, will take it personally and has no one obviously near to defend him.

As I walk towards the cottage, I spot a gravestone. My mother Brenda has told me this existed, but I wasn't sure if I believed her. The grave reads Derrick Applegate 1921 – 2005. My father had taken a large semi-circular rock from his beck at the bottom of the garden, rolled it up here and decorated it white with emulsion.

I would consider it an admirable run of years, but I happen to know my father has combined the lives of a man and an animal to total 84 years. It's not a man's remains buried here, but a dog's.

Joyce left her Labrador, Prince, out to pasture in my Gran's house when she moved to Hull. A year later, with motor functioning gone, Prince was level on the carpet letting go whatever relief his body needed. Trying to keep up appearances, his brow was in an embarrassed frown, as if the indignity – rather than his death – was the problem. My Gran asked Joyce, over the phone, if they could have Prince terminated. Joyce gave a sniffled blessing: the humane action was to slide a hypodermic needle into Prince's vein.

My Gran called my father to come fetch the animal. While driving across town my father made a decision involving Prince. His pot of slugs told him the dog was a reincarnation of Derrick, an austere man who died when my father was a teenager.

Upon entering my Gran's house he fork-lifted the dog in his arms, its bowels temporarily empty. My father and the dog both whimpered like they were each other's hostage. Joyce screamed protests in to the receiver. My father backed out of the front door with a twirl. His intention was to cut through the palaver. Derrick would not die on a vet's table, he thought. There were tears in his eyes as he whispered under the animal's earflaps. My Gran, her wrist wobbling with the receiver, searched for ways to tell Joyce that her grown son had done the right thing. She didn't think to negotiate with him by saying that it couldn't possibly have been Derrick: the death and birth dates didn't match.

Joyce and my Gran were forced to view my father's incident warmly. He'd acted out of "misguided compassion", that's what they agreed on when they heard the animal had died several days later. Once it was a carcass my father refused to touch the furry flesh. Prince was buried by a call-out veterinary service here in his garden.

I enter the pokey kitchen and take two steps into the loo. The sink and bowl are conspicuously clean. At head height, while urinating, it is a few seconds before I register what I'm staring at. It's the big clue. The one the police would have relished. It's the piece of grain in the long grass. Luckily no one needed to take a piss. Or they've seen it and the wreckage was purely for spite.

It's a copy of a painting in a cheap plastic frame. The picture could have been craft-knifed out of a book. It depicts a young girl looking at herself naked in the mirror. Tiny type says the artist is "Balthus". By her breast size and the way she tries to fake sexuality by putting her hands on her head, even without seeing her face, you can tell by modern standards that she is underage.

I stand over the toilet, with my cock out, mesmerised by this painting – in part with what I should do with it. Does its inclusion in the frame move the accusations a little further from "allegedly"?

I put myself away, scratching against my zip and with the other hand take the picture. Because it's a reasonably well-known masterpiece, there should be a certain leniency afforded to the owner. I fold it several times, creasing the smooth, glossy paper. It bulges in my jeans pocket. For the first time actual judgement is creeping in. I imagine Joyce will ask me what I'm concealing.

"Do we need to lock the house?" I ask once we're outside, looking up the street as if to catch a neighbour pulling apart her blinds and peering menacingly out – her perm fixed in place like a top hat. Joyce crosses her arms and then uncrosses them, correcting her body language. When she's flustered, like now, the ghost of a skin graft across her neck and cheek shines a soft pink.

I could stand here obsessing for too long with a conspicuous pocket and light up my 13<sup>th</sup> chromosome. That's where the paranoid schizophrenia is kept. Across twins there's a 46 percent chance of mimicking the disorder, mainly provoked by social situations, so what could it be across father and son? This trial could be the stressful trigger that starts my chromosome flashing and chiming.

I've justified my father's escape to a Yorkshire cottage as a way for him to conserve his functionality. Few are willing to abide boredom like the Petits. At least this is the reason I've delegated to my father: finally succumbing, in retirement, to a brand of caution I've esoterically followed. There's nobility in shooting for happiness, but those that are prone to doing so don't harp on about the physical risks. As part of my conservative life I can be taciturn, especially with Marie. Though, more seriously, I'm worried that the madness will disguise itself and won't afford me a luxurious cry for help. I've wondered each birthday if it's getting closer. Will it be a gradual motion, or will it attack all at once? And perhaps it's already begun, manifested in an obsession over how it is going to occur. I can self-analyse for protective reasons, but I assume madness – like HIV – has ways of disguising itself from its host's immune system.

Once I've taken care of the house I beep the BMW and Joyce gets in. We sit but I don't start the ignition. I nudge a switch and lock Joyce's door. The pause wakes her from her pointless busying.

"What's the problem? No petrol?" she asks and glances up, I think expecting to see smoke coming out of the bonnet.

"Nothing, really," I say, feeling the bulge in my pocket.

I still haven't pushed the ignition. At this stage it's comforting to think Marie forced me to be here. There is no responsibility.

"Tomorrow morning we'll go to the Crown Court," Joyce volunteers, as if itinerary will help. "We can go early and see your father and meet our barrister before the proceedings start," she says reaching out to touch my shoulder. I



flinch slightly. Unsurprised at my skittish manner, she doesn't move her hand from resting below my starched collar.

Joyce was overlooked for the Samaritans this year. The hoops you need to jump through to save people that would otherwise die at their own hand are humiliatingly rigorous. When Joyce emerged from her accident this was to be her vocation. She wanted to be the person you called when you were vulnerable. After a battery of psychometric tests they told Joyce that she could reapply when she was less anxious. I suggested that she should call the Samaritans – tie up the switchboard – sit on the line and threaten suicide unless they gave her a job.

“I was 12-years-old when I met my husband, you know,” she says. “And we didn't exactly wait a long time, if you know what I mean. He didn't restrain himself.”

Joyce is telling me that she was 12-years-old when she first had sex with the man who would later become her husband. He was more than ten years older than her and the world, the family, would act like it was nothing untoward.

This is why I couldn't trust Joyce's opinion on the trial. Her perspective on this is going to be skewed by trying to see herself in this child. “I'm not saying your father has done anything, but if I think back to how I was then: girls know what they're doing.” I push the ignition and internally sigh at the lonely place Joyce has put me with her confession. Only the slightest wisp of oxygen can pass through my throat.

I suspect she's angry that she worshipped my father in childhood. If he wasn't her brother she wouldn't waste her saliva spitting on him now.

Paradoxically my father has played an important part in toughening her up, acclimatizing her to people like him.

“I’m positive nothing happened,” I say.

“I’m just saying if it did: I turned out okay.” I glance sideways at her and realize I resent my father for not protecting Joyce when it mattered.

## Chapter 3

While driving to the Crown Court the next morning the parcel of letters from my mother is in my lap – squished at both ends like a rugby ball.

Brenda – my mother – insisted that we meet at my office the day before I travelled to Yorkshire. There was something, she said, that she wanted my father to have.

I saw it on the cafeteria table: masses of paper emotionally taped up to resemble a beautiful, tightly wound spring. They were the letters he'd sent her over the years.

The skin on my mother's hands, dotted with freckles, was stretched over the bone. She had a firm grip on Ewa raised over her head. My mother wasn't facing me so this could have been a private moment between me and my daughter, over the old woman's thatch, but the baby showed no recognition. She struggled to clutch at the hairpins, just out of reach, and flicked through a collection of undecided expressions: pulling her lips in, narrowing her eyes, puffing her cheeks. Marie has assured me that this is normal for a baby of her developmental stage, but I am unconvinced.

I moved across the room and the playing stopped. Brenda pulled my daughter to her bosom and stood. If I mentioned her in company then "mother" sufficed, but to her face I called her Brenda.

We were similar heights. She had the ghostly feature-set of a woman who had been practicing her enthusiasm and my tardiness had left it fake and

determined. Her grey eyes were losing their viscosity and the colour was escaping, like a degenerating cell.

We couldn't meet in my private office because I share it with two women and my name is not on the door. I hadn't lied to my mother exactly, but I'd possibly exaggerated my position of authority.

Talcum powder covered me as I embraced them both. Then I took my position opposite on the metal framed chair. The windows of the cafeteria were expansive, but sealed. Air con was my lifeline. I pulled at my tie: it was stubborn. I had left the house with it that morning, but by the time the train had stopped at the station it was tucked into my briefcase. I had retrieved and tied it around my neck for Brenda's benefit.

The parcel looked secure – difficult to open. Brenda's nose was flat across its bridge, like she'd had it beaten level. In the awkwardness of the meeting it felt like Brenda was going to scold me. How my mother would do this while at Primary School was to say I was being, acting or speaking just like my father. Her tone would be vicious as she had set him up as the worst creature you could be. She treated it like I had emulated him deliberately to spite her. So over time I reluctantly took precautions. My father's favourite cereal was cornflakes so I never touched them. I tried my hardest to unravel what I was programmed to be. He loved finance, so I took art.

The irony was that at 12-years-old I was abstaining from my mother's interpretation of my father. I barely knew the man, except from what she'd told me. I had to take her word on the details. She wrote his biography, edited it at her discretion and punished me with guilt accordingly. Most of my wisdom was

a composite of what she had drunkenly spouted late at night. She'd come into my room, kept in shadows by the hall light, and say she needed to chat. She'd explain a feud with work colleagues or a new pair of shoes she'd been bought, but drop in the odd remark about my father. His proclivity for John Lennon I tucked away. I was old enough to wonder if she had anyone else to talk to.

You couldn't avoid an entire parent – there were parts replicated in you that you couldn't chemically dissolve.

"So this is it?" I said, tapping on the mangle of tape and string. "You want me to give it to him?" She nodded.

"He wrote me twice a week when he was away," Brenda said. "And later he jotted something down once a month while up in Yorkshire." She stubbed out her cigarette on the railing and slipped her hands into my daughter's armpits.

"And you don't want the letters?" I said.

"I just think he could learn a great deal from re-reading them, you know?" she said.

"I'll be sure he gets them," I said stroking Ewa's scalp, persisting with the eye-contact.

I sensed Brenda's relief as the parcel of his letters passed into my hands. She loved shedding the burden. That's why she came to the office and forced me to put on that tie: she wanted her own version of events, how she remembered them, not those angry crazy letters written in different colours.

"Thanks," I said, allowing myself to handle the parcel. I shook the baby's hand goodbye.

I'm nervous at how my father will react to the parcel of letters. I'm arriving as Brenda's messenger and I'm not sure how he feels about his first ex-wife these days.

I park Joyce's car across one and half spaces. Instead of taking advantage of the dinky size, Joyce's car hinders me with a lack of steering or gearing assistance.

I totter up the stairs and negotiate through the Crown Court's metal detector. I can barely walk – it's as if a tennis ball has been lodged in my spine. The Crown Court's foyer has high ceilings, wood panelling and large windows. It's a design that doesn't attempt to embody the history of the law and in a way that feels like the trial will be less lenient. His alleged crimes are considered worse if put in a modern context compared to a few hundred years ago.

The security guard points out the board that tells visitors what's happening in each court room. We have arrived incredibly early: Joyce and I are mostly alone besides two people sitting across the expanse of white tiles. They are waiting outside different court rooms yet both are staring into their mobile phones with the same nervous avoidance.

Joyce does her make-up while I study the glass case in the centre of the foyer. It contains a model replica of the Crown Court. Someone has placed one of the tiny cars upside down on one of third floor balconies. Another of the cars has been skidded up to the main entrance. This mischief has been sealed in, irreversible behind display glass.

Joyce stops with one eye gawked open like Alex from *A Clockwork Orange* and bobs to glimpse a different few inches of her squinting face in her

make-up mirror. I look over at her. I want to ask her how long she thinks we'll be waiting to see my father. Sensing my attention on her, Joyce lowers her brush and says with an airy self-deprecation that a fair amount of her face is tattooed.

"Most of the eye work is permanent, so that will save time in the morgue when being dolled up," she says. I dismiss asking Joyce and instead go and ask the security guard. He says he'll enquire.

Joyce moves to lacquering on foundation. I imagine the prison warders, anticipating our arrival this morning, spreading chunky compact make-up over my father's bruises. Injuries sustained from warders and prisoners alike. The number of men would be restricted by the size of his cell, including space for weapons.

After ten minutes Joyce stumbles to the vending machine – she's unsteady on her feet since the reconstruction of her ankle. We're a pathetic, disabled couple, though her injuries are admirably real. Mine entirely originate from stress.

"Are you okay?" I ask Joyce, to distract myself from my throbbing backache. We haven't spoken for a while and now I've startled her.

"I was planning what to say to him," she says bewildered, as if she's lost count of an enormous sum in her head.

Joyce gazes through at the greasy snacks. I have an image of my father feeding the cockroaches his prison food as a tactic to get the insects plump. There's better meat on a cockroach than what is served out of the prison cafeteria. He'd bite into their shells, leaving the mandibles for last, sucking them through his chapped, crooked lips.

Joyce agonises over the flavour of crisps in the vending machine as if she's risking a possible pleasure that can never be retrieved.

A bureaucrat, a man who stamps forms and keeps copies of stamped forms, comes out of a consultation room and tells me that my father is ready to see us. The accused has been brought over from the prison where he's being kept in custody. I have an urge to rush away and leave Joyce indecisive over her vending machine, but she notices the bureaucrat, abandons whatever money she's invested and trots back over empty-handed.

My father is brought into the room by a warden with no expression and sat down opposite us. He is separated from Joyce and me by thick glass.

He would be in his cottage now if he'd opted for bail. I met with his solicitor in London who said my father had his chance at bail when the case went to the Magistrate's Court. The charge was serious so it wasn't guaranteed, but my father wouldn't let his barrister even entertain it as an option. There was money available. He hasn't squandered his pension except on organic food and BMWs for the last ten years. Why didn't he take it? But then why should he? Most days he reads. He spends time alone with less to live for than most. I arrived here wanting to be diplomatic, but this thought of unused potential in my father leaves me queasy. It makes me feel true anger towards him. He has crept from one pocket of impotence to the next during his life. While in prison I can see him being shunted around with an indignity that says "this is not my fault".



It could be a magnification of the glass but my father's face has inflated to caricature level. His usually impressive nose now swamps his cheeks. His dimpled chin is an ashtray.

"I've been to feed the chickens," I say. He swings his attention towards me with tremendous effort. He tugs at his top button. They've confiscated his tie and he's uncomfortable at the informal dress. Joyce and I sit close so I can hear her tights bristling on the plastic chair. "We saw the broken window," I say. "Nasty vandals weren't they?" My father looks perplexed at this topic.

"Vandals? What do you mean?"

"The kids who broke your window with a brick. They broke the hydroponics."

"Right," my father says and it is a curious sight because I've never seen my father tell a lie before. I always believed he would answer as truthfully as possible, or as accurately as his delusions would allow, but this is different. The tone in his voice implies motive.

"Dad?" I ask, genuinely worried. His knuckles are free of injury. The skin thins as you age, they become like pork sausages with blood eager to leave, but there's no damage.

"They want to keep me in here," he says suddenly, reverting to his usual energetic honesty. "It's quite amusing. That's why I got the trumped up charge."

"Your solicitor says that you refused bail," I say. I expect a psychotic backlash, but the question pierces his surface comfortably. His skin is old and flaccid.

“Yes, certainly. You know, in 1986, when you were a boy, they lined my passport with a receiver so I couldn’t leave the country,” he says and leans back into the curve of his bolted-down chair.

The delusion he’s got around his bail is a misplaced anxiety. He’s an obsessive compulsive turning a light-switch on and off. It is as if he’s trying to punish himself and I want to say that there’s no need.

“Did you bring the electric water distiller?” he asks. I say no. This visibly rattles him. How about today’s edition of *The Independent*? Or coloured pens for writing to the editor? Joyce chimes in with a terse negative. My pain shifts from side to side liberally.

“The Microsoft Machine? Is that gone?” he asks. Hesitating, I nod. His possibly incriminating computer is no doubt in the building. My father turns side-on in his seat, as if avoiding us at a party. “I had important documents on there,” he says. His rogue eye darts around – it’s a face that I couldn’t imagine a woman of any age loving consensually. Features that, if you were to burn off twenty years, look suspiciously like mine. “That Microsoft Machine. It’s in there,” he says through the glass, rubbing his cheek up against his shoulder, as if scratching a deep burrowed itch. He blinks rapidly, realigning his head. The guard, who is a few paces behind, is unaware of the facial commotion.

“What is where, Dad?” I ask. There’s a burn in my throat, a gush of saliva floods up to my teeth.

“She shall be brought to the door of her father’s house,” he says. “And there the men of her town shall stone her to death. She has done a disgraceful thing in Israel by being promiscuous while still in her father’s house. You must

purge the evil from among you.” It takes several seconds to realise that he’s quoting the Bible from one of his Microsoft Machine documents.

Joyce untucks a used tissue from up her sleeve and puts it in her pocket.

My father and I barely spoke for 16 years and if he wants to quote the Bible and talk about vaginal membranes then I’m fine with that. It’s not hurting anyone. But his conspiracies about women as secondary citizens won’t go uncontested by Joyce and her disapproval complicates my inclination to let his rants be considered patter.

I am suddenly exhausted. I’m angry, but I don’t care to shout. He’s in jail with no responsibility and I’m left out here with choices, but powerless. I want someone to scan my brain and convey to my father, Joyce and me what I’m thinking, so that I can go back home to bed.

“Graham,” says Joyce. His agitation is beginning to infect her, empower her, as if she’s been waiting to get him on the other side of inch-thick glass for years. “We’re going to leave if you don’t stop,” she says. My own sensibilities prick up at such a threat. Withholding attention was how you trained a house-bound dog, but my father clears the spit off his chin. He has already been taught.

Ultimately Joyce should have it out with her brother. There should be a resolution. Perhaps then she’ll admit that she doesn’t love him anymore and that he hasn’t given her reason to since they were children.

Joyce, as if she has smoothed out a creased skirt to her own particular standards, asks him how he is being treated.

“Fine,” he whispers. Joyce eases off a few banal questions about how the food is, if he’s getting the books he needs, if he’s made any friends.

At the mention of “friends” he looks up sharply, seemingly to check if she’s mocking him.

“How do you mean?” he asks. If you forget a truth about my father, like friendship being a taboo, then he will assume that you’re trying to needle him, build a case to deceive him. He thinks you’re pretending to forget for your own amusement or to win a favour out of him. “I’m in for a drug charge anyway,” he says. “It’s not like I’m one of these white collar pharmaceutical peddlers, those are the real crooks,” he says, pasting down the wisps of hair to his sweating head as if he’s being christened.

The truth is we all have a daughter, sister or niece that we’d kill to protect from the alleged likes of my father. I lower my gaze, unable to watch his grimace.

“Why, Graham, did you fire your first solicitor?” Joyce asks. “I went to great lengths to find her. She came recommended, I might add, on your station, *Radio 4*,” she says. This isn’t strictly true: Joyce took the call, but these niche solicitors search the papers and hunt you down with a tenacity like, well, that of the people they represent. There are thankfully not enough similar cases to create an ambulance-chasing environment.

“I don’t trust malaria tablets,” he says.

“Excuse me?”

“The lawyer woman, she ingested malaria tablets for months in her twenties. In Africa. They’ve made her irrational,” he says. I hear Joyce’s

stockings grind. My father had retreated to the services of his old solicitor down in London. The same man who had handled his second divorce and had no experience in child abduction cases. Though, when he handled my father's divorce from Pam, my father's second wife, my mother said he was shrewd and she was glad he hadn't been available when she divorced him years earlier.

The most long-term client I think he has is my father, handling his considerable estate. A decade ago my father sat behind a monstrous desk, handling wads of richer men's money. He had a dangerous level of responsibility when the preamble to his stroke and schizophrenia relapse started and so the company saw paying him off with a whopping pension as a bargain.

"Besides, the law is a man's work," my father says.

Joyce's discomfort turns my awareness to the parcel of letters. I'd forgotten them in my lap and now I don't want to surrender them. The hold I've formed is claw-like. There are helpful secrets bundled in this tape.

Abruptly a whistle goes off and my father is ushered away.

## Chapter 4

My father's barrister is Anthony Mulcahy. I shake his hand – there's a wart sprouting on my right index finger. A toothy nubbin. As the barrister's hand touches mine I worry that it's grating against his skin, duplicating. I'm sure the nervous look on my face is more socially off-putting than the possibility of smearing wart against his fingers.

I sulk down the passage. I have no stomach for pleasantries after witnessing my father cooped up.

Mulcahy points behind us at a piece of tiled floor where there's a barely noticeable bump.

"That's a ten thousand pound lawsuit right there," he says, going back to step on the rift, as if crushing a rat trapped in a paper bag. He reaches down with a fingertip and brushes the ridge. Mulcahy is a local barrister who's bread-and-butter is accident claims. "I love that shoddiness," he chuckles. "A fall like that could have you, in theory, eating out of a tube. It's my job to make sure that tube is gold-plated."

I try to catch Joyce's eye, but her look is vacant, her vision distant. She is mobilised on auto-pilot.

Mulcahy guides us into a consultation room: a metallic and functionary box. His court wig is in the corner. His own hair must blend seamlessly with the wig stitching.

"The girl says he approached her on the high street and forced her into his car," Mulcahy says. I stay quiet.

“And the drugs?” asks Joyce. “He’s not a dealer.”

“He doesn’t take money, sure, but he hands illegal substances out – and with his past convictions it’s a problem,” Mulcahy says. In comparison to the rest of the charges the drugs are being treated mostly as an aside, but in this manila folder The Drug Dairy’s legacy continues. No doubt the drugs were bagged and smoked once again by East Yorkshire’s finest police officers.

“Who,” I ask, trying to break unobtrusively into the conversation, “is the girl?” Mulcahy sneers at me as if her identity is inappropriate.

“Her name is Tara Goodwin,” he says, “she lives in Market Weighton. Attends the local high school, just. She was out in York for the day with her father,” he says, ruffling a few papers around. He wheezes like a flue when reaching for the bottom drawer of his desk. He brings out a pamphlet. “They are part of this sect, have you heard of it? Christianox? They go there every Saturday. Fleece people who don’t know better,” Mulcahy says.

I think of a young girl on the witness stand. She is blonde and perfect. There’s humility in her beautifully hung neck. I see her running into busy traffic, finding her father and shrieking her story to him and his buddies. My father would have pulled her into his car, the central locking sliding easily down, propositioning her. I suddenly have an image of Joyce with similar features at that age, when she met her husband Richard – before her hair was scared white. Richard is now 61-years-old with calves the strength and size of paint tins.

“And the vandalism?”

“Look. I don’t know your father. But from what I’ve been told he does strange, often inexplicable things,” Mulcahy says.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“I’m just trying to say I don’t think you’re in danger of jobs throwing a brick through your window. I believe your father vandalized his own hydroponics,” says Mulcahy.

“Why?”

“Who knows? A fit of rage? A brief hatred for his addiction,” Mulcahy says smiling.

“How do you know?”

“He called his solicitor in London and not the police. The solicitor drove up here over night, at your father’s expense, and made the assessment that the window had been broken from standing inside the loft.”

“My father lied?”

“He believes it was vandals,” says Mulcahy.

“I think he’s lying on purpose. I think there’s a reason,” I say.

“Look. It’s not an issue. It was never officially reported. It’s not part of the case directly, so don’t worry,” Mulcahy says.

“Okay,” Joyce says, cutting us both off. “What about the broken foot?” At this question I nod my approval, brushing aside the vision of my father easing his finger around the hem of a girl’s knickers. Mulcahy, though, is perturbed. He goes to a filing cabinet and peers inside. The sweat rings are forming under his shirt, but he tip-toes his gigantic frame around with ease.



“He’s facing a charge of assault and yes, quite rightly, he is guilty of that. When confronted by the girl’s father he used the car to run over the man’s foot. Cracked the bones in three places.”

“Goodwin is a lucky bastard. He’s going to be in court on crutches,” Mulcahy says.

“Are you surprised at all this, Mum?” I asked my mother, Brenda, when I went to fetch the parcel of letters. We stood on the balcony at my office and watched the traffic. With my tie loose, the fresh air inspired candidness. I dropped my guard of first names. I hoped this removal would evoke an answer, but as the word escaped me I worried that it would show weakness.

“At your father?” she said, blowing smoke off the balcony, so it might settle down in the street. “It’s just media hype, isn’t it,” she said, “no, Joyce tells me the Goodwin father is a brutish man, a real thug.” I smacked my lips. Brenda would defend my father during this trial to an irrational extent. Any guilt she’d gathered over the years at ignoring his sickness would come bursting through as feverish support. She was worried – as we both were – for what a guilty verdict would mean. How would it change what she thought of the intimacy in her life? What did it mean for the kind of people we found attractive?

“I’ve called Pam five or six times, she’s not interested,” said Brenda, agitated, shifting the baby needlessly on her hip. She believed they should share this burden of my father’s trial together. Pam was my father’s second wife.

Pam and my father had been work colleagues. Despite full disclosure of his criminal record, details of his break-down and the obvious chain-smoking, my father had wooed her with two pristine suits and a subscription to *The Independent*. Pam was sold the grandest lie with this frank attitude. My father had told his stories honestly but casually while sitting on the edge of a bed in his briefs. I may have gotten a mention, an estranged son, but Pam believed she was a sounding board. She would have been too nervous about giving the correct responses, and trying not to imitate an ex-wife, to actually listen. My father could have said LSD, ex-wife and harem in a calm voice and she would have patted his hand three times.

I visited Pam once, as a teenager, when she lived with my father. It felt like we were both being equally cautious with how we behaved around the man. It was a day of condescending health burgers, the kind you buy the mince for and prepare with an overpriced, plastic contraption bought at a trade show. People of taste prefer to purchase their home wares at an expo where you need to buy tickets to enter. Pam's motive – I now realise – was to point out what a terrible mother Brenda was and I think my mother tolerated it, because for the most part she agreed.

"Why should Pam care?" I said, biting into my sandwich.

"Your father," she said, holding Ewa limply as if she couldn't bear to touch what was mine. "He believes in justice." I dropped my chin so it rested on the railing. My father's moral code, based around insurance, was a point to defend for every member of the harem. It was the spiky conflict they hung their affections for him off. He spent most of the time "holding his tongue" and

believed he tolerated the world to good effect. We should be thanking him, not disciplining him, for how infrequently he detracted.

He has needed each of the women to snack on, not necessarily sexually but to vomit his abuse at: the raging froth of disconnected words. This was what Brenda tactfully referred to as his “temper”. It was a term the harem accepted, just as the words “lesion” and “schizophrenia” helped cover a great deal. When he screamed, “all I want is peace”, he was telling the truth.

With every rotation the women had got fainter in personality. My mother was the first pressing and I thought she carried the mantle with pride. For the harem his briefest of nods was akin to visiting a sanctuary, but I couldn’t imagine a partly formed 12-year-old girl being granted that nod. It wasn’t because of his concept of justice or morals. He’d be afraid.

For his court appearance my father is dressed in an ancient suit. The ruffles at the sleeves blend with his manacles. It’s the most conservative one Joyce could salvage. On a typical day he wears mismatched Oxfam attire, what my wife calls his “rags”. You’d think he’d been gardening, except there was never any mud and he was always wearing a tie. My father’s decline over the decades is obvious by the maroon he wears on his elasticated sleeve. He has held on to the debonair clothes he wore in his twenties. They were wrapped in moth balls and squirreled away.

He hobbles to his seat in the “dock”. It’s a semi-partitioned area behind the barristers. A custody officer is beside him. Before our stocky barrister takes

his seat he goes over to put a hand on my father's shoulder, as if they are in cahoots.

We rise on command. I see a man grab for his crutches, making an effort at decorum. I understand now why Brenda found it manageable to frame Goodwin as the villain. He looks uncomfortable in a long shirt with tattoos creeping out at the neck. Essentially she's used pre-packaged bigotry to defend my father. They're probably a clan with similar tastes and wealth to our own, but bolder with their symptoms.

The court clerk asks my father for his name and address. The old man hammers it out perfectly like a lost child in a shopping mall. He is asked if he's maintaining his not guilty plea.

"Yes," my father replies.

The judge reminds me of my father's *Pink Floyd* album, *The Wall*. He's wearing a wig that's dangerous yet comical. The jury is sworn in and they each take an oath (most refuse The Bible as is their right). My father's charge of abducting a minor is told to them by the judge. The jury is visibly disturbed from just hearing the nature of the charges.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. I slide it out of my pinstripe pants – not part of a suit, but I have two striped pieces of clothing that I've cobbled together. It's Marie calling, I slip the phone back and let it massage away at my thigh.

The gross possibilities of what could happen are tingling through me. I feel like I'm the only one who truly grasps the situation. Not my father, or Joyce, especially not the barrister, judge or jury. I am alone in my clarity. But the revelation leaves me helpless, as if the sequence has been pre-ordained. There

is no changing what will happen as I sit on this wooden pew and watch the outcome rush by me. I am a pivot point for the action to rotate around.

The prosecution calls their first witness. It's a shop owner who sells hydroponic bulbs in York and gave a statement to the police on that day in York.

The shop owner is neat and Indian with a combed moustache, but his family serving several generations in Britain has given him a dampened Yorkshire accent.

Joyce and I are seated at the back of the court behind a strange glass railing.

The prosecution's barrister is a thin-mouthed woman. She's the type I envisaged would have been chosen as my father's original legal counsel, the one who Joyce found on *Radio 4*.

"What did the defendant, Mr Petit, purchase?" she asks.

"A set of 500 watt bulbs," he says. The shop owner's neck remains rigid as he explains that my father visited his shop to purchase replacement parts for his personal marijuana plantation. I think of the industrial fans whirring calm throughout the cottage. Purchasing equipment to grow top shelf marijuana: this is my father's alibi.

"And when did Mr Goodwin, the girl's father, arrive?" our barrister asks. The room turns collectively to Goodwin, his crutches higher than his head, a beacon to remind us of what a monster is on trial here.

As my father stood clutching his bulbs, having refused a plastic bag out of consideration for the environment, Goodwin rushed with a friend into the

shop. They almost jangled the entry bell off its hinges. My father did not react. Goodwin stepped close and began to shout, swear, during which my father remained perplexed, as if he could wait this out like the wafting by of a toxic odour. It was when Goodwin pushed him that he panicked. My father hurried past the two men towards his car. It was parked proudly outside the shop. The car is what had led the men inside, as Tara had related the description and licence plate of the BMW.

The prosecution's barrister thanks the witness, satisfied at what she's extracted, and Mulcahy is called to cross-examine.

"Had Mr Petit been to your shop before?" Mulcahy asks, rounding on him with a television flourish. The shop-owner admits that my father hadn't been to the shop before and it is reportedly difficult to find. The front of the bulb shop is plain white and discreet from the outside. The witness stutters slightly, I can see he prepared his speech perfectly, but now his confidence is fading.

"Did he drive over Mr Goodwin's foot on purpose?" our barrister says, beginning to gather aplomb.

"I was inside my shop, as I said, but it looked like an accident."

"And who initiated the aggression?" Mulcahy asks. The shop owner hesitates. A slight bob of the neck breaks through with the nerves. I expect he's considering that abducting a man's daughter could be considered a first strike.

"Mr Goodwin was, as far as I could see, the initiator," the shop owner says. My father's version is that he has never seen the girl and her distress towards him hinges on mistaken identity.

“What of the defendant’s mother,” the barrister asks. “Did you see her? Did she visit your shop?”

“I did not. She did not as far as I know,” the shopkeeper says. He pushes his face too close to the microphone so there’s a squeal. This is my Gran they are talking about. I look to Joyce, possibly too frantically, wondering what’s transpired. What actually happened in that car?

“But she was there in York in her wheelchair, on the day?”

“I wouldn’t know,” the shopkeeper says, shaking his head and assuming that a point has been made to the court at his expense.

After three other witnesses are called to the stand – they each gave drab and repetitive statements to the police – the judge calls an end to the day’s proceedings.

Somewhere in the Crown Court building, young Tara is indulging in her own rest. The trial is broadcast to her via a video link. The camera points at the judge, jury and witness box. It’s so she can be involved with the trial without having to experience the trauma of a busy courtroom.

When she testifies they will wheel in a giant screen, her face will be magnified, like an Orwellian two minutes of pity.

“It’s good to keep the girl out of here,” Mulcahy says. “You don’t want her crying and shrieking for everyone to see. Let her sit in a room eating Maltesers, admiring the mess she’s caused.”

I resist the impulse to return Marie’s call. Instead I mill around the foyer and speak to Joyce. She admits to knowing my Gran was there in York on the

day. My father left her in Marks & Spencer, parked in her wheelchair by the hot air blower in the doorway. She claims to have drifted off. Herb's confectionary slipped out of her lap and she was woken by the manager several hours later. Goodwin wanted to show to the jury that he wouldn't have brought his mother to York if he was planning to abduct a young girl.

They are a particularly close unit, my father and my Gran. My father uses his BMW exclusively to trawl from his cottage to his mother's house. The distance is less than two miles. They are keen Scrabble players. The obnoxious beeping of my Gran's hearing aid is the main distraction, so he demands she turn it off, isolating mother and son uniquely. But he allows her as much time as she needs, smoking an entire cigarette to the nub while she fiddles with her letters, and he lets her pick unknown words from the Scrabble dictionary. My father invariably wins.



## Chapter 5

I follow Joyce across my Gran's front lawn. It's mostly a deadened rectangle of grass from where the caravan used to stand. The front door is locked.

"Do you think we'll get to see the girl?" Joyce asks. She means this 12-year-old, who I can't imagine being a few thousand school dinners older than my baby daughter.

"I guess she'll testify," I say.

"What do you think?" she asks.

"What I do I think about what?"

"I want to meet her. I'll know, Chuck, if I get to meet her. It happened to me and I'll know if it has happened to her," she says.

I stare at her, shocked at her vulnerability, but try to disguise this as an impatience for her to open the door.

Joyce wants a meeting with this girl to cast a well-trained older eye over her? Joyce is a woman with a second couch in her lounge swamped with old broadsheet newspapers – a mulch that gets shovelled away for guests. She's incredulous of this tween and somehow believes my father is guilty as well as the victim. This is different from my mother's irrational, guilty support.

I knock on the glass panes. Joyce pauses a second expecting me to say more and then clucks at the futility of trapping us out here. She rummages for her key.

When Marie and I stood waiting for my father on our wedding day it was our first moment alone as a married couple. We'd had a day of gracefully squeezing cake into each other's mouths for the camera, but as the crowd drifted our theatrics faded. She'd taken the Petit name and would be the first of the family to read and write French in four generations.

"I'm sorry you couldn't be at the church," said Marie, letting her dress drag into the gravel to accept my father's handshake. I'd told Marie, during mournful pillow talk, about my father. I just never thought they'd meet.

"Welcome to the family," he said, with a stutter of nods. I imagined a flash of contempt between the two of them. I would have been comforted by the friction. When a pair was embittered towards each other, you could control their enjoyment. But a friendship was unwieldy – it allowed people to wander off away and without you.

My father's body was that of a rag-doll, hitched together with used toilet rolls, but I saw we were both slouched onto our left hips with our hands cupped behind. I shifted my posture, vigilant to his mannerisms. "If such mimicry can permeate the gene pool," I thought, "who knows what I've created inside my wife?"

The marquee ballooned and deflated from the strain of the wind as my father indulged in a moment of stark loneliness on the gravel. He looked unaware of why he was there or what he should do. Marie wrung the satin tips of her gloves until my father, with a flourish, removed the car key from his bunch.

If there was a car that advertised to a jury that you had something to hide then it was my father's. It was huge and black – like a gallon of ink sprayed into the sea. This became our wedding present. The previous day he'd bought the upgrade: an equally black BMW seven series.

My father beeped the door open and walked around to the driver's side by mistake. He stopped in mid-stride, but missed the humour. He turned back and we passed, across the front headlamps, not touching.

My father's odour was blank. He bathed in half an inch of distilled water every morning with his thighs humped up against his nipples. He distrusted the fluoride and so would dab carrots with a sodden, tea-smudged dish towel rather than allow them to be washed with tap water. The BMW's boot was snug with bottled water in order to survive the wedding without opening a faucet.

The car's mileage was under a thousand miles despite having been driven for two years. The doors closed and we sat in warm silence. Positively soundproofed. No noise or screaming would make it through the rigid, glossy chassis. It wasn't as if I had a burning agenda to corner him for an intimate chat – my peace was with a biro and a diary – but I could have easily, with access to the locks, knobs and buttons from the driver's seat, barricaded us in there for hours. I had the opportunity to rant and rave, but his gesture of arrival on my wedding day, I believed, had cured our feuding. I breathed a quiet lungful, enjoying a moment of stability.

My father was upright, his left hand gripping the armrest while the other kneaded at the inner hem of his cotton pants. It was like watching a nun processing a rosary – not for penance, but by compulsion. We were trapped in

a Catholic confessional booth going 60 mph, but with no wooden slats to protect his identity.

Carefully he removed his hat and placed it on the dashboard. He buckled himself meticulously into the BMW, his tartan scarf pushed flush against his chest.

"I can't drive off. The best I can do is stay in the driver's seat," I said to my father, "and pretend." Marie circled the bonnet feigning interest. She would have let me drive around the block, happy to see us together, but my father believed that a woman's place was to discipline her husband. It was an understanding that bound men together, so that's the fantasy I gave him.

He checked his sideburns in the rear-view mirror. I scrounged my mind for small-talk, a pithy remark.

"Glad you could make it," I said. This was the same clipped sentence I had used on every guest in my rented suit. As for the church, my father could have come, but it conflicted with his values. These mostly involved being against churches, but included a mishmash of Confucius, Christianity, Islam and *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*. I knew he'd been waiting at a park round the corner during the service. My Gran had phoned him once we were a safe distance from the church.

"Turn the ignition," my father urged. My hands left the leather of the steering wheel. The lights sparkled and the engine obliged.

His lizard neck stretched out, sunning itself, and he explained with a conservative pride the myriad ways to adjust the seat. I could set it to my finger-

print. I touched my thumb on the sensor and whirring motors slid the seat a few inches.

We were quiet for three, perhaps four minutes. My fantasies for this father-son meeting had been rich with detail. Slow, yet well paced. But they'd been nestled in the safe fabrication of regret: the meetings unable to happen because of a phone call I hadn't made or a family reunion I hadn't attended. His tangible arrival, at our wedding, was overwrought: splashy and disorientating.

"A man gave me LSD on my honeymoon," my father said suddenly, wriggling. The metal rods from the past were piercing through to our quiet, amicable present.

I looked down at his fingers expecting him to pass me a thumb sized piece of paper, like how the acid was handed to him. His fingers were thin and his nails wide as if his hands had been circumcised. His second wedding present could have been for me to perform the exact mistakes he had for the past thirty years.

"I became entirely disconnected from what defined me in the world, actually," my father said. "I got a chance to start again. Dismantle the ego." I tried to remember which bit was the "ego" and which was the "id". My wife, who wasted away twenty grand at university, used these terms with authority.

I knew that if he'd slipped me this acid then I'd have dabbed it on my tongue. I'd have gone off to consummate my marriage fat-fried in hallucinogens. Marie and I did consummate the marriage, without drugs, that night and it had a functional rhythm that I dismissed as being equivalent to running the first few

steps of a marathon. The tongue, that would have licked the acid, proved to be my greatest asset.

I have, of course, since told my mother about my marriage's dwindling sex life. That was a perfect way to avoid assigning blame, by using the word "marriage" as if it was a storage bunker. It was no one's fault – especially not the two people caught deep inside. When sex was the problem trivial concerns became null, dissatisfaction an accepted sort of norm. If Marie was crying, when I came home, I assumed I knew why.

Brenda said that in lieu of seeing a counsellor, having an affair, or either of us admitting to being gay, the only way was to quietly push through. To stroke her cheek, kiss her closed eyelids mischievously and hope that the intimacy wanders back into the room. Like an old-age pensioner who had forgotten his keys. You had to hope that he came back.

My father and I stared out the windscreen of the BMW. Three identically dressed bridesmaids scraped mud off each other's shoes. The youngest had to use the pavement.

"It worked out as well as it could have," he said. I had a right to be angry at that statement. It flamed up in my throat so my exhaling felt insanely loud. The air between us in the BMW became cramped. I wrestled with my staple motivation to stay calm: he had avoided tests, certainly operations, but he was clinically unwell. That was the stance I had always taken.

According to my mother he was at the peak of his foaming madness the year after they wed. Of his letters the ones in the angriest biro were dated that winter of 1980, while my mother was pregnant. As I grew in her womb my

father's delusions multiplied. A zygote became an organism of paranoia. She retched with morning sickness as my father yelled "bitch" and "whore" with her head hung limp over the bowl. My father pawned her jewellery, not for money, even though he did spend it, but because he believed the iridescent jewels hindered the strength of his healing crystals. Claustrophobic with illness, she watched the original Petit man rage around their pokey flat while she weaved and rocked with his seed inside her.

"I wouldn't recommend it. The acid," my father said, his hand pawing his face where his beard should be. It was as if the trip was the last event he properly remembered. Termites ate his past away and left a frail impression for him to work with. "My mind went up into the clouds and left your mother behind."

I saw myself at his death bed waiting, stuffed sick with hospital vending machine M&Ms. I'd be wanting him to say he was proud or that he loved me, not being sure why, but knowing that once the morphine squeezed the words out of him the dissatisfaction would be worse than the waiting.

I gripped the BMW's arm rest and understood that this LSD story was the closest to an apology for his absence during my childhood that I was going to get. Since the stroke I'd treated my father as a peripheral entity, but there he was – sober – offering up his remorse. I fumbled for the sleek closure, but his admittance scraped up with it a horrible bitterness.

This confession, though, showed that the slugs in my father's brain must've been capable of love, or at least empathy. His features were nothing but extra helpings of pitiful mashed potato. All he wanted was peace.

“It worked out as well as it could have,” he said again. I undid my shirt’s top button and eased a finger behind my bowtie. My Adam’s apple felt dangerously sharp and angular.

My father vacated the car first, resisting a goodbye. I thought I saw him hold his breath as he deliberated his limbs out of the vehicle. He slammed the Beamer’s door and it made the sound of a perfectly constructed vehicle coming back together.



## Chapter 6

By seven o'clock I need to go for a drive, a beer. I can't read another old *Reader's Digest*.

The *Reader's Digest* magazine still arrives at my Gran's house. My Grandfather was a subscriber and no one has ever cancelled the magazine. It collects around the house, still in its plastic packaging. Herb has filled several overflowing drawers, trying to hide the residue of my Grandfather.

"We can play Scrabble if you like?" my Gran says. If I show my nervousness my Gran starts to question, apologising for the lack of entertainment and asking what I would usually be doing if I was at home.

"No, thank you, Grandma," I say.

"Darling, I've lost my cigarettes," my Gran says.

"Dropped them on floor," Herb bellows.

"Oh there they are, thank you," she says. "You always find things for me, don't you?" she says to her husband, as he walks out of the room. Herb and my Gran's relationship is like a sped up version of what went before. You get to see the mechanics more easily, the movements are larger, people project their voices and the themes are obvious. The benefit of a relationship after love is that you know your part and you can play it well.

Joyce obnoxiously pages through my Gran's newspaper. She's breathing shallowly and I can see she's constructing elaborate fantasies of how varied and exciting her life would be if only people talked in this family. She's doing this quietly, to herself. I expect Joyce thinks we should be discussing frankly with

each other about our feelings on the trial, about child abduction. The truth is: if given the chance, she'd be mute. And she would be devastated about how hard people would work to re-package the crime. She, of course, should know: she has spent most of her life doing a similar service for her husband Richard.

"I'll be off out then," I say.

My Gran looks like a picture a small child would draw of a person: no angles, her hands blob into wrists, all five fingers a single mass. There seem to be very few moving parts.

"As you like, my dear," my Gran says, glancing at me dazed, reaching for her book. She tilts her head so she can peer out of the bottom of her bifocals. This flippancy concerning my whereabouts puts me off kilter. She is disinterested – as if I am my own free agent. She's floating off to a careless space.

"What's your book about, Grandma?" I ask, annoyed. I point at the library hardback. She turns it over to glance at the cover. It's a romance. It looks as if she's forgotten the title.

"Oh, all I do is read. Herb gets me five every time he goes to the library. They load him up and he brings them back," she says.

"But what's it about, Grandma?" I ask firmly. She has a brief flash of terror, before flipping open the dust jacket and reading me the synopsis.

"Not something you would probably like, darling," she says, satisfied. The stress of my father's trial looks like it's hitting the woman hard, making her careless for people's safety, turning her mind brittle. Her thumb has been

marking her place, almost half way in to the book. She dismisses me by quietly returning to her book.

I leave the lounge door open. Herb comes from the kitchen to close it as I'm pulling my coat over an already heavy fleece.

I manhandle the BMW through roads without street lamps. There's a docking yard for trucks half a mile out of town. My father picketed for a by-law that would force trucks to drive around the town, not through the streets. It was never passed.

As I move into fourth gear I'm sure there are headlights in my lane. A horn blares, letting me know that it's a truck. He blares again, twice – not shifting. I grip the wheel stiffly. If I don't do something I realize that I'm going to collide with the truck. The thought arrives coldly as if I'm reading it off a teleprompter.

I haul the car into the curb, it lurches like a boat trying to slap over the first wave. Metal scrapes. The truck screams adjacent. The BMW stops, but I continue to shake. It was as if the truck had been driving on the wrong side of the road.

I fumble with the handle. My sweat evaporates when I open the door. I circle the car for a few minutes. Was that a targeted attack? Was it a sabotage job? It's hard to tell when specific words aren't spray painted on to your property. While in thought I almost skid in a mess of ants as they methodically strip meat from a carcass of road kill.

I push the ignition button. The engine sounds depleted, tired. I pop the bonnet and prepare to look at the beast's engine. The sleekness gives me a painful anxiety. I use my mobile phone to illuminate a section. New cars aren't a jumbled mash of mechanical entrails. They are a Lego kit with plastic looking chunks and possibly a USB jack by the petrol inlet.

I arch my shoulder blades, looking up at the sky, to acquire a few seconds of pain relief. Yorkshire affords you a generous smattering of the Milky Way. It's meant to ground you, being out in nature. Sunsets, doctors tell me – when they can't detect a symptom (besides the pain) – are perfect tranquilizers. You need to watch the sun closing the world in darkness. This is a human's best therapy: futility. I don't hate sunsets, that's giving them too much, but when I watch the sun rise I'm saturated throughout with the feeling that "this is so clichéd". I wait until it is fully in the sky before I duck away, never sure how high it has to get until it's considered over.

I check the dashboard on the BMW. I think I've ripped a fuel line. I call the AA with my mobile and they say they'll send a tow truck. As I speak to the operator I struggle for a comfortable position as if I'm wrestling a snake. Every scan, prod or poke from a medical professional has diagnosed my pain as inexplicable. The condition is psychosomatic, they say.

The BMW breaking down feels like it could be a problem that the mechanic, like the doctors, will fail to detect: physical symptoms, but no sign of trauma.

During my pre-teen years Brenda took me for an MRI scan. She demanded money from my father to cover our coach trip and travel lodge. On

my father they found lesions nesting in his brain, tucked into the folds of his cortex as you would pack a delicate artefact with Styrofoam. That's what Brenda was probing for with me.

My MRI was negative, but I never trusted the result. When I can't sleep at night, and the ibuprofen has yet to glaze my bones in treacle, my blame drifts. Secretly, I never feel that a physical pain can originate in the mind. Madness, sure, but to cite stress for immobility feels like an admission of self-harm that, in turn, is a problem you should fix alone. You should be reticent that you allowed your mind to reach a state where it's turned on itself.

I'd prefer that one day they discover lesions, on my spine and pelvis, sporting tiny asymmetrical faces of my father.

The MRI scan was like being shot out to sea in a torpedo casing from a James Bond flick. I was 11-years-old and very worried about exposing my shiny, hairless pubic mound in the hospital gown. The machine, when turned on, is like a Gatling gun being blared over your head. If Brenda intended that to frighten me then she orchestrated a winner. I've never forgotten it.

A man gets out of what isn't a truck, but a van. He's zipped into a one-piece jumpsuit – you'd need the Jaws of Life, designed to relieve mangled steel, to undress him. I rush into the car and try the ignition again to be sure: it's still dead.

I'm wary of this man knowing who I am and recognising my father's car. He smiles warmly, clicking on a powerful torch to bleach the road. The skid-marks shine against the tar.

“I’ve called for a tow-truck,” I say while pushing my hands into my pockets.

“Is everything okay?” he asks

“There was a truck,” I say.

“Are you from the continent? France?”

“No,” I say.

He gestures with the torch. I can feel the skin on my face and arms heat up – the skid marks stretch along the right-hand side of the road and finish under my wheels. How long had I been driving like that? How could I be so nonchalant? How does someone who knows their mind drive on the wrong side of the road?

The man steps closer, smiling. Without a word he produces a roll of tape and a self-designed siphon. I look up the road for the threat of a registered tow-truck finding the BMW in a position that’s so blatantly criminalized. I will be signing swiftly on a clipboard with the town’s most conspicuous surname.

He removes one of the BMW’s Lego blocks – underneath there are more comforting entrails – and tapes up a pipe that has loosened in the altercation. There’s the molten sugar smell of petrol. He feeds the siphon into his own tank and I watch him suck. Even in the low light I can see his eyes bulge when he tastes the lead. His gums are toxic with petrol and it’s my fault. It could kill him, right here on the side of the road. I would be left with a car, identical to the one belonging to the abductor, and a curious stranger dead from poisoning.

He gets a thumb up there fast, holding the flow. He manoeuvres the spout and lets it gush a few generous litres from his tank into mine.

“Thank you,” I utter.

It is only when he has screwed in his own petrol tank cover that he slips the literature into my hand. At first I think it’s a bill for a service that you assumed was out of good will.

In the dark I make out “...path to our Christ” on the pamphlet. I feel vulnerable, like my soft underbelly has been turned over. I am revolted that he would prey on me with my father in jail as if we’re a colony of lepers ripe for conversion.

This evangelical mechanic breathes the residue of free petrol in my face and asks if I’d like to “try out” a service on Saturday. I don’t explain who I am.

“Do you recognise me?” I ask, slightly incredulous that my personality hasn’t been acknowledged. He shakes his head. I’m not a paedophile’s son. I am a grade one victim: a stranger in need of service.

We shake hands. He betrays a faint look of regret before trotting back to his cabin.

There’s a telephone number of the Christianox York branch at the bottom of the pamphlet. This is where Tara and her father were on the day in question, praying in what appears to be, according to the address on the pamphlet, an office block.

I have petrol but I don’t trust myself to drive. I’m disturbed by how vulnerable I felt while being given that pamphlet.

I’m a few miles from my Gran’s, but within walking distance of the Griffin pub. I pass the statue of Britain’s tallest man. Around him there is a two foot high railing and a sign that reads: “CCTV Watches This Site”. It is more a

testament to a youth's idea of a prank and the preventative lengths to which the local council will go than the Briton's achievement in height.

The Griffin has a "For Sale" sign in the window. There are five similar public houses scattered across the town over two high streets. I open the door to a welcome heat. There are plenty of bodies. The carpeted walls are dense with stale cigarette smoke. Thousands of awkward moments avoided by the puff on a fag have been blown up to the ceiling, left to cling for posterity.

I order a pint of ale at random and feel Marie call in my trouser leg. No one else would be calling me at this time of night. I consider stepping outside; otherwise my speech will be framed as being inside a pub with the assumption that I'm drunk.

"Hello," I say over the din of the fruit machines. I think of mentioning the pamphlet, making it an amusing anecdote, but when I flit over what happened I realize I don't want to explain how I managed to crash the BMW off the road. Marie worries if I show any sign of unusual behaviour.

"Have you managed to read any reports while you've been up there?" she asks. I mentally curse not stepping outside. They are still in my briefcase in the boot of the car.

I tell Marie that I love her. I sometimes think we married because she was easy to read – like a John Grisham or a Dan Brown. You don't know what's coming next, but you've seen it all before.

She says that she loves me too. I can hear the baby murmur and Marie asks if I want a word. I close my eyes: they feel hot and red behind the lids.

"Sure, put her on," I say.



I look around the pub nonchalantly as I talk softly to my baby daughter. Then quite suddenly in my vision is a man.

“You spilled my beer, mate,” he says to me. Liquid is strewn across the bar and his glass is half empty. Or I suppose, if you were a certain type: half full.

“I’m on the phone,” I tell the stranger. “I didn’t touch your beer.” But I can’t block him. No instinct to attack is taking control.

The closest I’ve been to a physical fight is with Cath, my ex-girlfriend. They never qualified properly as fights because I never hit her back. The cruel truth was at times I wished I was the kind of guy who retaliated. I felt that Cath was goading me for a reaction.

I would stand as tall as I could, like a pedestal, with my precious face on top to be protected. When a woman attacks a man she doesn’t use the tactics you hear about in cases of domestic violence. “Punch her in the stomach, she won’t bruise in the stomach,” a man will offer as advice to other beaters, I imagine, as if there are organised meetings. When my ex, Cath, clobbered me she went for the face. Her nails were everywhere, scratching deep embarrassing marks.

I wasn’t afraid of her attacks, because she was pushing for me – so flamboyantly – to cross this social line. She was showing me the way, inviting me to decimate her – testing if I was man enough. It was how the devil tricked a man in a fable. If you both act violently one of you goes to bed with anger problems, the other as a woman beater. I wondered how men who let a punch

slip coped with the paranoia. She'd always have that over you. Self-defence or not, she would own your reputation after that.

I knew Cath felt my distance was crueller than a little blood, she begrudged my passivity more I think, but over the years I realised that if you let your girlfriend hit you – smack you in the mouth so your own teeth cut your lips – then you would settle for anyone. Any woman was clearly okay for you. I thought I had a reserve of self-confidence which prevented me from dating certain people. Clearly, though, I would stick it out through abuse just for periods of affection.

The stranger with the spilt beer roughs into me and I close my clamshell phone, attempting to stuff it into my jeans pocket as I catch my balance with my left foot. Despite the commotion in the pub no one has mentioned my father. I bunch my fists.

“Look, mate,” I say, straightening my back to gain height, “let me buy you another. Make amends. No hard feelings.” I have a few more clichés to reel off as I produce my wallet but my face explodes. I realise my ex-girlfriend went easy on me. This blow feels like my brain has expanded, needing to shell my skull, like a hermit crab. My vision crackles and I see my opponent rubbing his fist. I read on the Internet while at work, not during my lunch break, that more people have died since gloves were introduced into boxing. Hit a man bare-knuckle and it'll damage your hand, you won't be able to hold your pint of beer steady for a week. With gloves you can punch as hard as you like. I take

comfort in my attacker's bare-knuckled pain. Then I wonder if his own sensory distress is his fetish.

As I touch my face, checking for numb patches or signs of blood, I assume that the altercation is over. I won't need to buy him a drink. There's an off-licence across the way so I can finish my drinking alone, sulking and in peace.

Another blow lands on my left ear. In my confusion and an awareness of cheering from the crowd I manage to grab my beer glass. I rested it on the top of a fruit machine while on the phone to Marie. In a windmill motion I curl it up and over, crushing it against the man's crown. The cheap Stella branded glass splinters. A few shards brush against his eyelashes.

I hope this retaliation brings about an ending. Two blows to the face, versus a christening with half a pint of Stella. Surely this is enough? But he wants more. This prompts a call from the crowd for the police. The bar is being sold: they need to maintain the fixtures. I fall to the ground and the filth lodges me in place. With my knees at my chest I assume the foetal position. The bones in my fingers protest.

For a moment I try to track my mind back to how this happened, if I ever said goodbye to Marie, if my daughter heard the dignity being kicked out of her father over the phone and will seal it away as one of her first memories.

To her I will forever be a man rolling around on the floor in shards of broken glass from the beer mug that I cracked on a man's face. While my father will disappear into anonymous incarceration, reappearing as a late-sixties stallion, with a swaggering bank balance.

The police drop me at my Gran's. It's after midnight and I can't resist taking a look in the mirror.

I tug at my swollen lip. Sullen eyes, gormless jowls, a muddy, petulant head wound, a bright red ear and a broken rib. The left side of my face is as battered as my father's right is inert. My cracked ribs grind under the skin, creating a needless friction. I feel stripped down to my essentials.

When I've arrived home drunk in London I've promptly thrown up before falling asleep. Marie will pester me to brush my teeth because I stink of vomit and I have awoken occasionally with a toothbrush being raked around my mouth, as you would dentally hygiene a dog.

The difference tonight is I'm not drunk. My mind is lucid. It's fascinating to prod a cheek that so misrepresents my blazing mind. I'm predicting the future, regretting the past, fizzing with ideas that I should be writing down.

It's not that the best time of my life is over: it's that it never happened. It's not death I'm wishing for, but a contented hum. The past is infected and I want to cut it off at the knee. I don't want it flowing through to the present. I want to choose the point where the fade to black will happen.

Before leaving the mirror I stroke my eyebrows. I have one eyebrow that is becoming incrementally white, from right to left, a millimetre every few years. Marie has joked that it's distinguished, but to me, at times like this, it represents an irreversible decay: a segment for the first kid, another few millimetres for the first divorce, parental deaths and then the rest for retirement.

My Gran has put a silver painted crucifix on my pillow. I scoop the crucifix aside and robotically pull out the parcel of letters. It is now heavier in my damaged hands. I wrench at it uselessly before getting a steak knife from the kitchen. The paper and tape split like a layered birthday cake.

The letters are green, red, blue and black. I saw on the BBC that pure and thoughtful minds take the most joy in colour.

The biro scrawls over every page in ragged, illegible hand, yet they're set out according to the classic school-taught format of an official letter. I scan through a couple.

The line that stands out in the middle of a page says: "*...the bartender in the Nag's Head is poisoning my beer.*" I keep reading as the colour of the writing changes to turquoise. "*After he pours the draft, before he hands it to me, he's got a syringe under the counter and he squeezes out a few drops. That's why I'm getting sick*".

I look squeamishly at another. My father and I have eerily similar handwriting – manic, doctor-worthy, with g's and y's that hook their tails through two full lines of text below.

They remind me of my diaries. I have them boxed, taped much like the letters and it's the only box I hold on my lap when I move house – the rest goes in the truck. It was tradition, each birthday, for me to receive a lined book of pages from Brenda with a platitude on the inside cover beside a date. She couldn't have known how muting a diary would be as a gift. I took this as an order to put my worries on the pages rather than disturb or rely on anyone else. It locked me away.

Reading these letters I realize how I anticipated mad changes in my twenties. I still secretly hold on to the fact that I'm going to be special. Now I am 29-years-old and gasping for excuses. I am average and living a normal life. No madness has picked me up and pushed me over the trenches. I feared I'd be writing my own set of colourful letters by this stage and there is a tentative relief that a birthday card is all I'll manage – but I'm left with the disappointment of what a life becomes when you spend it waiting for destruction. A half-assed attempt built on the promise that the components would disintegrate. I thought I'd be the kind of guy who would evoke a chaotic harem. Having failed at losing control all it feels that defines my personality is a battle for complete control of everything that influences me.

I open another letter.

*"I sit on this vibrating pillow and wonder where my life has gone,"* one says. He was a salesman at home appliance fairs while taking interviews in insurance, after Ethiopia. He had a knack for shifting cheap and easily breakable merchandise. *"A sure-fire sell is to mention it cures diabetes: improves the blood circulation from all the vibrating, you see?"*

I grow accustomed to the patterns. The green biro is for his God voice: for explaining how he sent Abraham to the desert. The black writing is conversational, suited for pleasantries over what he read in *The Times* yesterday and the red is – I now realise – supposed to be my voice.

*"I'm two-years-old and need a proper Christmas tree, not one with a metal frame, I need one that grows!"* This is the message written across the bottom-half of one page. I begin to re-read all the crimson, finding out what my

father thought I wanted as a toddler. It turns out: I desired enlightenment, the language to spread the word and a “*safer gas cooker*”.

I remember this from the chats with my father as a child: “Chuck,” he said, “no matter what they tell you, misogyny takes two”. I wrote this down and looked up the word later.

He also sent a Bible to my confirmation – an illustrated version that he’d kept from when he had to sell a few thousand as a salesman. Inscribed in the front was “I don’t believe any of it, but good luck.” I still have the signed Bible, but I’ve never opened it past that first page.

I re-position on the bed, choosing to affect one area of pain for another. The worst scrape is down my left flank: self-inflicted from lying in my own broken glass.

I try another letter, becoming addicted. A few are postcards that my mother has stuffed into envelopes. The date at the top (in black) says “*12 September 1991. Vincent, this is my true father not the man who sleeps in the master bedroom but the brother who visits and washes the sheets. I am a cuckolded baby.*” I read that sentence again.

Despite the ranting and delusions there is such honesty in these letters. It’s striking. They smack of motiveless outpouring. My father has been known for many things, but not lying. So, it is the letters that force me to pick up the phone. I don’t see a choice.

The DIY undertakings were already suspicious, but coupled with the lies over the vandalism I’m scared. I thought I knew where I was with honest ramblings. And this was an action that could so clearly constitute an alibi. First,

was he clever enough to have built a precautionary fence in case he needed the privacy? Second, could he have smashed the bulbs and so created a reason to drive to York that day? This is the first time I have questioned my father in such a way, but they are valid queries.

I phone the Christianox York branch. I'm simply curious, I tell myself. The call goes through to the Christianox switchboard and I write down the times of their services on a spare envelope from one of my father's letters. It looks like my father could have written down the times because our handwriting is so similar.



## Chapter 7

A man on crutches lurches out of the supermarket. A young girl in tiny shorts is playing adult with the bags.

The two of them have been at their Saturday service at Christianox and they've done a little shopping afterwards. I'm not tracking their movements – I've been sitting in a tea shop opposite the statue of William Bradley – but I know the times of the Christianox service and I've developed a curiosity in these people, there's no doubt about it.

It is mid-afternoon grey. Goodwin manages to carry one shopping bag by hanging it off his index finger. He is flushed at the gills like he's trying to handle his ego, daughter and public sanity.

Tara unloads him on to a bus. The passengers and driver are gracious. She waves to her father and is so brief with visiting the newsagents that she could only have been in there for cigarettes.

Tara's hands are crammed into the pocket space of her denim shorts. She isn't pushing a bike with a pink basket. She looks haggard, like she's recently aged beyond her years. Ironically this pushes her out of her illegal restriction. With this frown and stance you could mistake her for being 16, but when the clouding retreats she has a freshness that is unmistakeable for a child. I get up and start walking towards my Gran's house. After a few steps I consider turning around, as if walking on the same pavement as this girl is salacious. Then I notice that we need to take the same route to get to our

respective homes and we're both content to walk slowly, hiding from our families together.

What would Joyce think of the girl's shorts and stockings? I scan my memory for girls I knew at that age. What would I expect Ewa to wear in ten years time?

I'd hoped, secretly, Tara would be impossible to turn down in terms of beauty. The real Tara is not tabloid beautiful nor does she have a face that would sell a thousand papers. She has a dyed black fringe that is long down her face. I can see a neighbour cutting Tara's hair with a pair of kitchen scissors blunted on credit cards.

I watch her go into the house – a semi-detached face brick, decorated with a satellite dish. I think I expected toys in the front garden, but she's 12. The door opens in the shadows of their low-energy lighting. I instantly feel a twang of sympathy for Goodwin as he ushers his daughter in, twirling on his broken foot. I should be feeling damnation for him and his crooked, lying family. Instead I can imagine a man who's scared of what this could mean for his daughter. In ten years when her relationships are serious, or broken, or maturely flippant. How much grease will be left on her decisions about men from this incident? The son-in-law that Goodwin has to eat Christmas dinner with for the rest of his life could be chosen by his daughter as a direct result of what happened in that BMW. When he slices a rich slab of roast turkey it will be as if he's feeding my father.

Our barrister is staggering around like the best man at a wedding who's lost the rings. He is approaching members of the court and whispering hurriedly into their sideburns.

My father is called to the witness box. The lady barrister openly assesses my father, silently suggesting the whole court does the same. I'm beginning to understand why my father fired his woman solicitor as his counsel. This type of woman could extract animosity from any man over 50. She's the type older men wish for an opportunity to dismiss. She's a self-proclaimed feminist whose presence has my father sneering, baring his discoloured teeth. My father neglects to use whitening toothpaste like most smokers his age. He is a firm non-believer in harmful reactions to cigarettes, visual or otherwise.

"Mr Petit, do you live alone?"

"Yes. Actually," he says.

"There was a painting, Mr Petit, found in your house," says the woman. "Where did it come from?" My father's eyes widen, a hint of intrigue is creeping in. My father's brand of misogyny begins with respect and ends with betrayal. Women are the people who have hurt him, ravaged his life and are now possibly sending him to jail. At first he's interested by their strength, but eventually as they challenge him he becomes over-wrought with frustration. Tara would be a curious exception to this trend.

"I used a craft knife to cut the painting from an art book. Actually," he says.

"Was the book a gift?" she asks, and my father bites at his lip, unsure how to proceed.

“It was a library book. Actually,” he says. Crows feet flush across the top half of his face at the misstep. She maintains her earnestness, despite my father’s childish squirming at being caught defacing a library book.

“And there is nudity in the picture, isn’t there Mr Petit?”

“I wouldn’t know. Actually,” my father says. His words are fast, but he relaxes a little once they’ve moved from the issue of it being owned by the library. His neck wrenches off to the side. He can’t answer – his speech is blocked, he splutters.

“This painting hangs in your bathroom?” she asks. And my father squints – unsure of what she is insinuating. His eyebrows pull together.

With a slight raise of her finger the lights dim, the overhead projector bulb explodes and across the court a police photo is projected. It is a photo of the painting. The plaster is peeling on the wall behind. The police clearly photographed the entire cottage. The desperation stabs at me like piles. It’s the exact image I removed of the girl attempting to appear older through her reflection. How ridiculous I was to think I could conceal anything. I was ineffectual. The jury murmurs.

“Do you own a library card, Mr Petit?” she says. He is silent. “It says here that an overdue summons was sent to your house. You were suspended for unpaid fines.”

“I used my mother’s card.”

The lady barrister goes on to ask my father about the day in York. He sticks to the story that he was in his BMW, crawling along the curb, peering out of the tinted windows and hoping to find the hydroponics shop. This is when

young Tara believed that he was tailing her. She had a surge of “Stranger Danger” which prompted her to run off and tell the adults. The prosecution makes the excuse sound absurd.

Mulcahy, our barrister, stands to question my father. The two men have learnt their lines but the performance doesn’t showcase them as actors.

Mulcahy emphasizes that, according to my father, there was no interaction with the girl. He doesn’t remember seeing her. His defence is incompetence. With that he steps down – the questioning of the defendant, by the prosecution and the defence, complete.

During lunch I’m told that a psychiatrist is going to testify. Brenda has a habit of reminding me, about once a year, usually after a couple of fingers of gin, that if I undergo a breakdown then I should commit myself. I shouldn’t put Marie through what my father did to her. Marie has conservatively agreed. My father’s history means I don’t get an option to rage or show any sign of discomfort.

“Dr. Jeffery Fitzgerald,” the woman barrister says. “Have you examined Mr Petit?”

“I have” he says, licking his lips.

“Did the defendant co-operate with your examination?”

“No,” the psychiatrist says. The barrister nods with disapproval.

“Is Mr Petit a rational man?”

“In my professional opinion he is aware at all times of his actions,” says the psychiatrist.

My father's harem has never had an outsider judge him before against society's norms. It's disconcerting to see a professional lay claim to his sanity and take away his excuses. I have to accept that the multi-coloured letters weren't written by the man on trial: my father has aged, according to a professional, into a mentally fit man who could have performed a horrible act. The country eccentric who the psychiatrist examined is not the man Brenda fell in love with.

There were times, as a child, when I caught my mother crying on her knees among individually wrapped presents that had been sent, tied in red bows, to replace what had been broken during a fight. He had spastic flailing arms and a tendency to break lamps. It was as if to say, to his wife, "When I run out of lamps you could be next."

I don't know which man I prefer: the aggressor or the victim. Then with equal parts relief and anxiety I realise that I don't get to choose.

If anything separated my father's criminality from his craziness, it was his willingness to talk about his views openly to anyone. He has scattered an anecdotal trail of evidence for his misogyny across town. If you're not a woman, and don't interrupt him, he'll talk to you for hours. By his nature it's assumed that his thoughts and actions are vocalised. The most disturbing thing about his secretive nature concerning the vandalism and by extension Tara is that it humanises him. He was comfortable with his actions up to this point. This is the first thing he's hidden wilfully. And that shows an agenda, which means he has a notion of external morality, a fear of judgement. By being monstrous, he gives

off the fumes of being human. And that means I can treat him with the suspicion warranted of any other human.

I'm on the portable, fiddling to re-program it from the deaf settings. Joyce is standing next to me, on the second phone, ready to listen in on the call. She has the phone to one ear and is pushing her finger so deep into the other it looks like it could cause damage. Can she sniff out a broken hymen? Does she think this is her super-power? The quiet truth is she believes that she's due certain compensation, if only arrogant insights, for what happened when she was a girl.

Herb walks past. The man never changes from his slippers, but it causes Joyce to shoo him with dramatic gestures over what she considers too much noise.

"Mr Goodwin?" I say. "This is Charles," I say, "from London." Joyce winces at my unprofessional tone. I figure in my nervousness I'll be given a free pass for having a Big City allure to Goodwin. When I lived in Brighton with Brenda we'd visit the city and I would be awed whenever the tube talked. When the voice warned of delays because someone was "under the train" the tone suggested that a chap had slipped down, like a rat in the wall-space. The technicians were heaving out their giant buckets of grease so they could pop the blighter up on to the platform, fine and well, where he belonged.

"Yes?" he asks. His voice fades as he moves the receiver from his mouth to hang up.

“I’m the man’s son,” I say finally. Joyce’s frown deepens, etching through the Botox. There’s another grating pause.

“Charles, was it?” he asks, his attention snagged. His accent is unapologetically broad and I can tell he’s surprised.

“I’d like to meet with you and your daughter.” I say. Joyce nods her approval.

Goodwin snorts his disbelief.

“How’s three o’clock?” I ask and Goodwin slams the phone down.

Joyce and I stand on the matted carpet. I hang up my phone and then Joyce does the same to hers, as if she’s following my example.

Just before 3 o’clock I notice my molars grinding. Joyce has been pacing in her coat for twenty minutes.

We decide to go for a walk and I lead us, without Joyce questioning, to Tara’s road.

I take us there because I’m starting to feel betrayed. I’m angry that lies have been directed at me and I have no way of dealing with it. I can’t speak to Marie because I don’t want to feed her negativity towards my father. I want to calm my suspicions quickly and on my own. Joyce’s ability to sniff Tara out as defiled is the only strategy we have available.

I stage a brief pause outside Tara’s house, for Joyce’s sake, pretending to be unsure of exactly which house she and her father live at.

It is five minutes past three. I rock from my toe to my heel. What can push us inside?



“We need to maintain the pretence of helping her,” Joyce says. Ethical conundrums for Joyce are like childhood traumas: they constitute barriers to be ignored until they dissolve.

Are we going to stand in the cold, loiter across from her house and watch the front door until it gets dark?

“Do you know what you want to ask her?” I say. Joyce shakes her head.

It’s the tiny part of doubt in me that has brought me here. That picture in my father’s bathroom, don’t forget that as well, I tell myself.

Of course, I know that he’s innocent.

Joyce is here because she wants to find out if this girl is like her. Joyce was molested as a child and she thinks she’ll be able to sense it on Tara.

I look needlessly both ways for cars, following Joyce across the cul-de-sac to her young doppelganger.

Goodwin opens the door and waits for an explanation. Despite the crutches he has kept his side-parting groomed.

“Mr Goodwin,” I say, resisting a peek over his shoulder. I stay locked on his milky, blue eyes.

“I’ve seen you at the court,” he says. My anxiety increases. I’m thankful for the bruised cheeks and skew nose as a buffer for the immediate comparison between me and my father. However, the erratic, slurred speech courtesy of my busted lip and medication could close the gap.

There’s a musty smell of damp walls forever being dried by central heating.

I see movement inside and chance a look over Goodwin's shoulder. It's Tara: her hair is pulled back with her young scalp mercilessly taut. She is dressed in a thick sweat top and baggy jeans. I try to conjure up an image of my father: innocent and wrongfully accused.

"I phoned earlier," I say, extending my hand. Goodwin moves to slam the door. "Let me at least give you my number," I say.

Tara is now at the door as well. I see that the sweatshirt top swamps her. She looks as if I've lost my glasses and her shape has blurred into a lineless, sexless form. She can't manage eye-contact. Rather than a starlet proud of her close-up, twittering on her court appearance, she's a child.

"What the hell would I take your number for?" Goodwin says.

I pass one of my office business cards through the closing door and I think because of Tara's presence he takes it out of impulse, to show manners.

Tara pulls up one of her gaping sleeves as the door slams closed. I realize, while staring at the closed door, that they weren't her clothes: she was dressed by Goodwin. She was wearing eye-liner when I saw her marching down the road, but that was denied today. What I'm realising – and Goodwin doesn't understand – is that it isn't the make-up or the body that are enticing. These things wouldn't have drawn my father or I imagine any sexually damaged man to her. These men know what is beautiful about her, more than anyone else. It's her act of saving face and being brave that is attractive. Loosening the tight clothes doesn't disguise that this is a child who believes she lives with the weariness of an adult. My father would be drawn to this cute, manageable version of a woman. It's a child playing at being older and getting it wrong. A

man like my father – not my actual father as he is innocent – would take great care and satisfaction putting Tara right and teaching her what it really means to be weary.

“What’s your verdict” I ask Joyce, watching the imprint my shoe forms in the mud. Joyce purposefully walks ahead of me. She doesn’t answer. “On the girl?” I add, but without conviction.

She isn’t coming back to my Gran’s house.

“I have a doctor’s appointment,” she says.

“I know, Joyce. You told me.”

## Chapter 8

The doctor's waiting room is plastered with advertisements. Posters jostle for their problem to be the one you concern your GP with.

The family doctor, now in his seventies, is the man who treated Joyce's father. He strides around reception, signing clipboards, stooping to talk to patients. When I expect him to neutralise his hunch I see that it's permanent. He is contorted into a pensive stance 24 hours a day.

I am sitting on the bench, unable to move and grateful for the restriction. The doctor tied my bandages professionally. I try to remind myself that he killed my Grandfather.

Joyce doesn't let her focus waver – as if she's summoning the power of the universe. Joyce believes negative thoughts can manifest physically. So how does she explain why the universe gave her that limp? Those scars? Did my injuries cause my father to get a secret beating yesterday? Or vice versa. Is the energy of the universe causing both of us to be persecuted?

The receptionist assumes Joyce's glaring is impatience at not being served.

"Just a few more minutes. Dear," she says, giving her warmest insincere smile.

"Thanks," I say on Joyce's behalf.

The GP treated my Grandfather for indigestion. It was a misdiagnosis. He dished out inappropriate tonic for eight years until my Grandfather died of colonic cancer. The medicine from the GP never sorted out his constipation.

There was no second opinion. He didn't have indigestion – well, he did, but that was by-the-by.

Joyce stands up to pace around theatrically. I think she likes to show that she isn't, and never will be, close to forgiveness.

The weekend before he died, my Grandfather undid his pants in the front room to relieve the pressure. This was the first time he had publicly expressed discomfort. The folds from his shirt became untucked and poked awkwardly over his belt.

They were still untucked when my father drove up from London – a record quick three hours in the red car, the one that would become his fish tank. He strode deliberately past my Gran as she answered. The front door was locked in those days. My father stood heavy over this frail man, his fists hanging by his sides. Perhaps he sensed his father's imminent death, as elephants do. I read about the elephant graveyard in *National Geographic*, but most people remember it vividly from *The Lion King*. Then, instead of a bold carrying away, as he would do with Prince the dog, he went berserk: screaming, flaming abuse, swearing, resorting to the claim of "I am not your son", until he got a tear. Then he got in the Beamer and drove back to London.

Joyce is led off by a nurse. She has a self-proclaimed "thick head" – her hormone replacement pills are depleted.

My phone vibrates and I can barely get to it I'm so tightly bandaged. I don't recognize the number.

"Hello?" a tiny voice says. I've never heard her speak, but somehow I know that it's her.

“Hi,” I say. She must have got my number from the card I left for her father.

“How you?”

“I’m fine. Tara, is it?”

“Do you want to meet, perhaps, if you want to?” It is as if she knows that she has to play the role of the little girl. I feel the power-dynamic lurch beneath me.

“I don’t think your father will let me in,” I say.

“We can meet at the duck pond,” she says. If Tara wants to speak to me in private – and I think that it will help – then I’m qualified.

“Why do you want to see me?” I ask.

“You’re Graham’s son? From like yonks and yonks ago?” she says.

“Yes,” I say.

“He mentioned you, I guess,” she says.

“He did?” I say.

“Not your whole fucking life story. He said your name once, I think,” she says.

“Okay,” I say.

“I just thought: why not. My Dad seems crazy against it,” she says.

“How’s tomorrow morning? Around 11?” I say.

“Gotcha,” she says and hangs up.

If my daughter got into a mess like this I’d appreciate someone wringing the truth out of her. Tara will realise, by talking, that her recollection is a mistake. It might materialise that what she’s told Goodwin isn’t true. She could

have exaggerated certain parts and from there I will be in a position to help nurture all parties closer to the truth. I think of Ewa and her doughy cheeks.

Perhaps under the guise of a hypothetical scenario I could tell Joyce of this meeting with Tara? It would create a wriggle room for me to decide what it could achieve. Joyce could advise me on how teenage girls behave, console herself on knowing exactly what they do.

I sit reviewing the floor for a couple of beats and a girl comes out of an adjacent doctor's room. She must be 11 or 12. Her hair is forcefully straightened and she's carrying a chrome painted bag that can't hold more than a packet of condoms.

When Joyce returns her scars are glowing pink – warning me not to get involved. She snatches the brown bag of pills from the receptionist. The doctor walks up to me and tries to convey his total lack of surprise over what just happened. We are about to have a moment – I realise – where the doctor and I communicate to each other that women are irrational beings. A different species. Kind of stupid.

“Sex drugs for men are relatively new, but women have been sneaking around upgrading their hormones for years,” he says. Joyce is waiting by her Ford. She is actually wrestling the cardboard box open,

If I go alone to distinguish Tara's truth from her rambling then she might drop the charges. Primarily I was sent here by Marie to support my father and meeting with Tara is the best way to do that. The problem with Joyce is that her judgement is clouded.

The doctor's hands are puffy as my Grandfather's were. That's what I remember about my Grandfather: squishy domes of skin like the paw of an animal. I'd press down and they would take several seconds to inflate.

I jerk my head back and pop a few cortisone drops into each eye. There's a metallic residue that forms at the back of my throat. It's putrid, but the associations are good. You can get addicted to the side-effects. It's the satisfaction from willing to suffer to be healthy. It's how I imagine drug addicts feel about dry mouth or a collapsed vein.

This old doctor who killed my Grandfather: I know he's the type of man who can be called upon for favours. It would have to be under the pretence of professional respect, but he's hungrier for people to respect him than to be ethical.

"You shouldn't drive," the doctor says, as Joyce starts to thumb a pill out of its foil container. "But then neither should she," he says with a snigger. I decide to laugh, it's a forced chuckle but it's enough for the doctor to smile at me. I'm not sure when I might need this man again.



## Chapter 9

There is an old couple occupying the bench, monopolising the ducks. They could be in love, but in small towns you feel that people don't chuck out anything or anyone. They keep the bath water and clean themselves with it for the rest of their lives.

The duck pond in Brighton was where I would try to take girls when I was a kid. You'd kiss until she pretended to be pregnant.

I stand on the verge, far from the pensioner couple. Tara totters in pumps across the cold ground, slippery from frozen pond water. For this visit her father certainly didn't dress her.

I move to shake her hand, but the action is cramped from her standing so close. This girl could be a police operative specialising in entrapment. The ducks' intestines could be scooped out and fitted with camera equipment. We'll sit on the bench, her hand will reach for my leg and I'll notice, absently, that the ducks aren't eating the bread crumbs.

"What happened to your face?" Tara asks. Her hand impulsively reaches out. The muscle relaxants let me forget how injured I am, though they leave me woozy and disorientated.

"It was a misunderstanding," I say. Does she assume it was a fight over a woman? She can't know that technically it was an attack over an alleged lust for her. She's the reason why my father is in court, fighting for his freedom, that must inform a certain self-confidence.

We pace into a circle of ducks to scatter them, but they move belligerently – they shift and quack with spite. The pensioners stand to leave which means that we pass each other, two couples, as if visiting the ducks is normal, village life.

I urge her to sit. We both watch the pond water surge through the grating. There's no bread to offer but I oblige, out of ceremony, to trick a black ragged duck into sucking up a pebble.

She looks like she's holding her breath, as if threatening to turn her face as blue as her flaunted forearms. Her outfit has patches exposed that look calculated to maximise flesh, but maintain ample heat. Any hue around the cheeks, caused by the low temperature, is covered in gloss.

"Tara, aren't you cold?" I say, judging by her eye-line she's studying my mouth. She shrugs and I feel that sycophantic impulse to be a friend to children, to set up an evil adult conspiracy and place myself on the outskirts. They are all liars except me, understand? I want to be a confidant. I impulsively want to be honest. And mostly it doesn't feel like it's a choice. "How are you finding court?"

"It's not, well, you know?" she says, squirming, as if she's growing right in front of me. "It means I miss mornings at school, but Miss Harris says I have to make up the maths or I'll fail my exams."

She reminds me of how I was when young, but she's not the child I'd like to have living in my house. I fantasise Ewa will become earnest and surprisingly sarcastic, but have the patience to teach me endlessly. I want my daughter to be the curious mind that I never managed to ignite in myself.

“What do you think of Mr Petit?” I ask. The kid noticeably shudders. She isn’t going to answer. “What do you think of me?” I ask and she glares into the bricks.

“We met on the Internet,” she whispers. “He suggested we arrange to meet in town, like in real life,” she says. Surely, if they’d met on the Internet this would be, no matter how thoroughly files were deleted, traceable by the police? I slump back into the bench. Is she a straight-fringed girl who has her adults muddled? Is she adding an extra detail with each telling of this tale? “I got into his car and then I couldn’t get out,” she says and impulsively massages her own wrist as if tending to bruising. Her shoulders have sagged but she’s retained her shape with the puffy jacket. She looks up at me and in the whites of her eyes I don’t expect to find a sign of her lying. “His hands were huge,” she says.

“I didn’t want anyone to know I’d been chatting to him, yeah, or to stress out,” she says.

My attention skips around the duck pond. I expect Tara to break away from our conversation and go climb a tree. That’s how I imagine young girls: as tomboys.

Tara has me juiced with distrust and I’m afraid how I might respond to her. Distrust is a fuel the body takes like an alchemist and either boils it into anger or perhaps wears as a brooch of fawning servitude.

I wasn’t ready for a confession of on-line chatting, but I don’t contest this with Tara. I don’t want her to retort. I’m comfortable believing that Tara is lying.

“I thought you’d be, well, mad with me because I told the police about your Dad,” she says. A duckling waggles its legs against the current.

I remember her sneaking into the newsagents.

“Do you have a cigarette,” I ask. From her maroon bag the size of two coffee cups, sequins in a lazy pattern across one edge, she produces two singles. They are wrapped in notebook paper. She wouldn’t smoke enough to warrant putting a box in that tiny bag. I take her lighter and hold it steady by her lips. I watch her take a breath, expecting her to retch. She manages the inhale and exhale as if learning a classical instrument.

I stretch my legs. The smoke burns my chest. Eventually, after the wisps have reached up to touch the leaves, I turn my body slightly, opening my shoulders.

“Yes Tara, I was angry,” I say. Suddenly, without any pretence of seduction, Tara flips over onto her knees with the demeanour of prepping to kiss me. I think of the ex-girlfriend, Cath, the beater, the one with the power of public humiliation. I imagine that Tara’s mouth would open immediately, wider than you’d expect and leave a clown-lips print of saliva around my own.

“Are you still angry?” she asks, staying on her knees. I don’t react – I’m rigid, like my father is in court. Perhaps this is how she’s taught to interact. Gooseflesh has sprouted down the back of her exposed arms.

“If the charges aren’t true, Tara, then you need to tell the police nothing happened. Then I won’t be angry,” I say. “You’re a strong girl, Tara, you’ll get through this,” I say, taking a grape. The fruit bursts. There are rough seeds on my tongue. “And you don’t need a court case to compound matters.” With that I have given her a decision: the world sliced perfectly into black and white.

Tara's eyes flit momentarily across my bruised face, her feet barely touching the ground. I am a 29-year-old married man who has brought a 12-year-old girl to a secluded duck pond.

"When I was a kid, right?" she says. "I didn't have good eyesight and I reckon that's why I don't pay attention to much. I'm in my own head, you know? Because I couldn't see any stuff except what was in my head." She stops for a second. "Blah. Blah. Blah. Jesus," she says, "do you ever get bored of your own, like, voice?" I laugh and it feels rough on my throat, like a roll-up from my father's tobacco crop.

"Yeah, sometimes I bore the hell out of my..." I want to say wife, but it could sideline the mood. She could become threatened. "...friends." She won't know this is a lie. That's a trait my father and I share: we haven't managed to hold on to close friends.

"Did you always want to work... at whatever you do?"

"I actually wanted to be a stand-up comic," I say – impulsively, not sure if I've told anyone that, except Marie.

"Like Russell Brand?" she says. "That's pathetic." I pull my hand away. I didn't plan for that to happen.

"Are you glad you're not in the courtroom?" I ask, a stern teacher tone overcoming me.

"I'm in a room upstairs. I'm not meant to say which one," she says, her words growing softer as she rolls her tongue along the sentence. The reeds drift as I wait. There's a bunch of grapes in her hand, wrapped in white tissue paper: succulent and imported. It's her first time and she is motivated to get it over

with. Her pain is blasting over any complications, or involvement I might have, like radio static. There is no nuance for her – she simply wants me to get it done. Your function in the act, as a bloke, becomes as simple as pushing her down the stairs. She knows that she needs to get this finished – even if she's blinded by pain – and you will just have to show up. You're safe. You are necessary without being sensual or attentive in any way, no matter how little pleasure you provide.

“What other lies have you told, Tara?” I ask, hoping this will crack her veneer. “If you say you knew him, if he didn't drag you in to the car, then why did you exit?” My voice unexpectedly breaks, so I smile – an automatic reaction from my puberty days. I'm already laughing while my voice continues to wobble.

“I was, like, uncomfortable,” she says. “Besides, he didn't look like I expected,” Tara says, evoking a perverse flash in my tongue, the blood rush causes my damaged ribcage to throb.

“What were you expecting?” I ask. She shakes her head.

It's crippling to hear that your father can't impress a 12-year-old girl. As you get older, younger girls should erode, become easier. My father should be omniscient: he's been through it all before. But this categorising works both ways. If you're going to be attracted to the stereotype of a young girl then you need to adhere to your own as well. If Tara wants the mould of an “older man” rather than an actual person, she's expecting money, emotional security and the general ambition to dictate a situation.

Is this a refuge, a place where she can be honest? Is this the truth that's coming out of her? Confessions of my father's faults? On-line chatting? If so,

then the truth is my father planned to meet her through contact on the Internet. His intentions are bared. The next question is how far he pushed his intentions once she was in the car.

“I’ve, like, you know, been thinking about stuff since it all started,” she says and closes her eyes. If it means that she’ll stop talking then I hope she cries. It’s morose watching her butcher her own emotions with hesitation. Crying is a universal substitute for hundreds of fractured sentences. It’s how to be taken seriously when you’re a girl like Tara.

There are no tears. She remains quiet, waiting for me to speak. She notices the wart on my middle finger. The liquid nitrogen has been successful, but there’s a husk. She grabs my hand and sets about picking at the defeated root. All I can think of is how she needs a cup of soup and a blanket. There is no way for me to express affection. I am not going to abduct or adopt her, so I will sit here and wait for my daughter to grow.

Tara’s eyes are confused and searching. She retreats and pulls her bag on to her lap, so it forms a barrier. She stares down at the bench and grabs my wrist, pulling my hand, the one without the wart husk, to her stomach. It’s as if there is an ear upon my palm and I’m to listen to her insides. I allow her to manipulate my wrist, but I feel nothing but the cheap, Topshop fabric. It’s the kind of Chinese designed knock-off that would burn her a new exoskeleton if she got near a flame.

There is no stomach bulge for me to discern. Holding my hand to her is to illustrate rather than titillate: she rubs it in circles as if casting a spell.

I trace a look from my hand on her flat belly to her face. Her mouth looks damaged, like her teeth would have to be black and rotten inside for the anguish she's feeling. I pull my hand away as if stung.

I realize I've been wrong. I feel the same disappointment that a parent must. I believed in my father against everyone else's doubt and I've been proved wrong. My father's flippant misogyny of his earlier life suddenly appears quite banal.

"You're pregnant?" I ask.

"If that's what you want to call it," she says. My father is guilty of so much more than what he is being accused of in court.

"Have you told your father?" is all I can ask. She shakes her head. "How about the actual father?" I say, quite unkindly.

"I wouldn't want him to know," she says. That I can understand. How am I going to make sure no one discovers this?

She folds the notebook paper into her tiny handbag and zips up before walking away. I watch her go.

I remain on the bench. I break a few grapes from a stalk, left on the seat, and shove them in my mouth. A sinister rash breaks over me. My lumbar constricts. Did I just ask a little girl to drop her charges against a guilty man?

In my chaos I want to speak to Marie. I haven't called her for a few days. The rings pile up: six, seven, eight, I bite on my lip.

Two ducks, who have been snuffling, look up. I tell them with my mind that my father impregnated Tara. He heaved himself on top of her tiny frame



and fulfilled his hymen promise. I say this with my mind to the ducks. The animal on the left bobs its head to the ground.

“Hello?” Marie asks. I assume she has me placed in the category of “delicate”, but her caution is my fault. I’ve been feeding her anxiety for years. Whatever you do, I’ve said, don’t let me smoke, inject or taste. I’ve pleaded for her to be my conscience and to police me when I show the slightest sign of madness. When you ask for someone’s help you make your failure a Team Failure. I’ve turned her into a warden so every irrational word I say has her suspicious. I surrendered my option to be inconsistent years ago.

“What’s up?” I ask, as if I’m unaware of the game, okay with everything. Any opinions I have on Tara or my father could make me look conspiratorial. David, Marie’s therapist, has advised her on several occasions not to speak too freely, otherwise I get upset. It could be dangerous. He believes I’m oppressive. Freely, though, Marie was okay telling me this paradox. She added that David told her that she shouldn’t. I argued that if he was a decent professional he would have anticipated this.

“How long are you going to be up there in the North?” she asks. She has generous warmth in her voice, a peacemaking tone.

“I’m not sure,” I say hurriedly. “It could be another week.”

“Okay,” she says. “Charlie,” she says quietly. “What’s changed?” The bile rises in my stomach.

“You told me to come up here,” I say, latching on to the initial premise, “and support him. That’s what I’m doing.”

There is a silence, except for the sound of a woman recalibrating her investment in me. I whip my hand easily through my hair. The anger deflates from my shoulders. "I'm sorry," I tell her. Tara has been raped, molested, impregnated and I'm apologising.

## Chapter 10

The one woman who can verify Tara's story is home, of course.

"Hello, darling," she says as I bluster in from the cold. I order a coffee from Herb. My Gran's face looks to have turned sly, but the expression is how you imagine a pet to look evil and I have to remind myself that it is possibly a projection. We sit in silence for a few seconds.

"Grandma. About that day in York?" I say.

"She was a pretty girl," my Gran says suddenly. "She reminds me of photos of your mother, Brenda. Ones I've seen from when she was at school."

"Wait. Which girl?" I ask, startled at my Gran beginning this conversation so easily. She's acting like we've been speaking for a while.

"And what of that man?" my Gran asks, shifting gears, genuinely perplexed.

"Which man?"

"Her husband. He still phones me. We're good friends you know," she said. "He has always been polite and paid for us all to go on holiday together one year," my Gran says. It takes a few seconds for me to realise she is talking about Joyce and Richard. "He never shouted. Not once," she says.

"Which girl were you talking about, Grandma?" I ask, using the disjointed, ragged situation to slip in my question. I'm suddenly frightened. The old woman could know the truth of what happened in that car. Did she offer to accompany my father to York for an alibi? I'm not sure that my Gran would hide evidence for her son. I think of the milk bottle shattering and her fetish for policemen.

“Which girl, darling?” she asks. Her words are slow, as if she is trying to negotiate me down, off a ledge. My Gran holds her leg, wrapped in skirt, and breathes deeply. “Oh, get me my pills, darling.” I reach for the plastic bottle on the coffee table.

“The Goodwin girl, Grandma,” I say, my voice cracking. It is only here that I realise how upset I am. It’s a point where the guilt of interfering and the sadness of the arrest are intertwined. I can’t pick the two strands apart. Tara could be lying, of course. There’s a chance that’s she has been impregnated by someone else, or not at all, but I think this old woman knows the truth. Of course she does.

“I’ve had MS since I was 43,” she says. “That’s an ever so long time isn’t it, darling?” I nod, but I’m surprised at how I’ve been infected by Joyce’s distrust for her mother. My Gran was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in the late sixties and Joyce believes it was a mistake, but one her mother never wanted to admit. “I lost my sight for a brief spell,” she says, putting a finger under the lens of her spectacles to touch her right eyelid. “Me and Granddad took a part in a play, amateur dramatics, you know? And I was so excited by this I think that’s what caused me to lose my sight.”

She is now confused. Her face scrunches in recalling the details. “Then I got a much worse spell – years later – and they said that I wouldn’t go back to work, but I did and stayed at Barclays bank for ten years,” she says. “I worked as a cashier.”

“Grandma?” I said, my voice straining, as if appealing to her.

“But she acted far older than she was,” she says. There is a tortured practicality in my Gran’s voice. Love and sex for this old woman have become a combination of mopping up effluent and boiling rice to the clock. “He assured me that he’d be proper about it,” she says. My eyes were wide. If I turn away or blink then I’m worried the vision will stop.

“Why did she get out the car?” I ask.

“I wouldn’t know about that,” she says, but I anticipate a need for an answer so I edge closer. “You know, darling. I could do with a new pair of legs,” my Gran says.

“Gran. Why did she get out?” I say, feeling like I’m intimidating her. “He must have said or done something.”

“He didn’t say,” my Gran says. “But what he did say was she got upset when he mentioned they should wed. Now isn’t that strange?” My Gran looks to be struggling to hold on to the conversation. “Your father was proper. He saw them having a life together,” she says.

My Gran has always wanted him to get a girlfriend. Things were different in her day, I think. She met Vincent when she was 13, a family friend. Vincent was the oldest brother and when he went off to college then she married my Grandfather James.

I take one of her menthols without asking. An inherited rage arrives like a dead weight in my chest. It isn’t energising, but it is a powerful ballast.

“You should think about what you’re saying,” I say with menace, as my father would have done. There is a fascinating result: my Gran swallows several times. Her face ripples like a snake shedding a skin. Her features become stern

and aware.

“This is how he saw his future,” she says. “Why would she refuse that?” It is a credible plan for my father. He honestly thought he was propositioning a wife that day and possibly brought his mother for approval.

My Gran is no longer playing dumb, asking questions to divert attention. Her eyes are fixed on mine. This is how she must be with my father, I think. I understand the closeness he has with the old woman and how he must resent that it isn't with someone else. She will garrotte you until you stand up to parent her. My Gran needs my father's temper, she feeds on it, licks it up. “He said he would be proper,” she says again. “He must have been upset when she said no.”

I am beginning to identify with the uninspired wooden ridges of the courtroom benches. They have taken on a gruesome similarity to Catholic Church pews. They aren't carved beautifully, but neither was the seating in St. Mary's. I take the same spot each time and I know I won't have to interact or engage for at least an hour, that's the mentality I remember from church.

The jury is a generic spread of 12 English Northerners. There's a mash of flailing teeth and spider veins, the alcoholism popping through the cheeks and creeping up to the eyes. The tall, blonde and beautiful were pillaged by Vikings from North England and taken to the continent hundreds of years ago. This missing genetic beauty is apparent – its absence has streaked through to the present leaving the women on the bench scratching and sniffing. A man on the front bench struggles to dislodge a crust of sleep from the corner of his eye.

The stand-by light is glowing softly, waiting. This is how Tara will be appearing to us: digitally. Today is the day Tara Goodwin testifies. In the courtroom. With her mouth. She'll tell the story of what my father did almost six weeks ago in York. Her image will be stretched and distorted from an undisclosed private room above our heads.

I smile at the absurdity of how formal this will be compared to the duck pond.

"She's going to need to be tripped up, the facts exposed," Joyce says, as if the girl should know better than to mess with our family. My hands are kindly in my lap. Joyce's past and similarities to Tara are certainly refracting her perspective.

My father has been readied and edges into the court. The bags under his eyes are etched viciously into his face – his pupils dilating for territory. I want to go up there and mitigate: guide his speech and posture so the jury doesn't perceive him in this state.

Tara looks like she's about to do the English oral of her life. Her hand touches the Bible – held by a person of indeterminate age and gender off-screen.

I wonder how competent my father is at reciting verse – or if he's only a strict follower of committing to memory the parts that prove his theories.

Tara wets her lips and I'm suddenly terrified of what she could say. It feels as if there are no checks or balances. My life is lying prostrate between this girl's lips. I'm not sure she understands what she's capable of. There will be

no way to rewind. Her nerves are brittle, but there's a sense that if she sits carefully enough they'll remain intact.

Tara states who she is, where she was on a specific day and what school she attends. The prosecution's barrister paces around the court, nodding in response to the answers. The legal secretary punches away on her typewriter.

An impotent webcam is mounted in the centre of the screen. My father sits through most of the trial Po-faced, his Jenga tower of features precariously balanced on top of each other.

There's a beauty in how I want to reach out and help my father and an impossibility that allows the reaching to continue. It would be easier to approach Tara and pay her money until she's happy. I would work in London and send her wads of notes until this episode was nullified.

"Tara, do you know why you're here?" the barrister asks. As the girl launches into her rehearsed answer, the camera in the courtroom slips. It has been fixed with adhesive, but must have melted from the heat of the lamps. Tara should be locked in her private room with a view only of the barrister on her personal screen – but the slip gives her a full, magnified view of my father.

"He's in the building!" she shrieks. My father's face blushes, like an ugly vase being filled with blood. Besides that he offers no flinch or reaction. The giant plasma screen face of the girl continues to shriek. She yells about how she can't bear to see him, how it is too much, too painful. Every emotion that's displayed here is going to be absorbed. Each member of the jury is extremely



porous. A scream from a 12-year-old girl – the alleged victim – is akin to dosing the court with a fire hose.

The insect-shaped opposing barrister is entirely unmotivated to flick the camera up to its original place. She stands gormless at the way her hours of research and practice are being trumped with a technical glitch.

My father is rooted to his camera primed position. I see that I was incorrect to believe the girl would avoid mascara. The spectacular emotion is impressed by a black swirling mess, as if her face has been drilled viciously for oil.

The court resumes. After Tara's display it is as if the speakers of the courtroom are operating on a hypnotic frequency.

Mulcahy cross-examination has been postponed. The prosecution rests their case and the defence calls its first talking head. Mulcahy asks for a police officer to take the stand.

The officer tells the court that my father's computer contained no traces of pornography. There were no pictures of young girls, strewn out self-consciously on a bed, waiting for a cheap digital button press.

"He knows how to back up pictures and delete an Internet history, big deal. He's not on trial for that," Joyce whispers to me – and I nod, with minimal commitment.

The prosecution asks a few pointless questions, but can't avoid that the well that is usually most incriminating in this type of case is dry.

Mulcahy calls a forensic scientist next. The man is wearing black pants and a white shirt reminiscent of a waiter. Several sketching pads are scraped over to fresh pages, slightly out of sync with each other.

This man has clearly been briefed not to show excitement with what he's found. It is a child abduction case and he is about to give evidence in the monster's favour: best not to do it too feverishly.

He reveals, under oath, several truths. The jury sees him, I'm sure, but they still hear Tara, moaning in a satanic gurgle.

"That's right," the man says tilting his lips to the microphone. "The car is too large to accomplish the acrobatics Tara Goodwin has claimed to have happened. It's a big car and not an automatic. Mr Petit is meant to have leant over in the car while driving, opened the passenger door, seized her by the wrist and pulled her inside."

"And this isn't possible?"

"He wouldn't be able to reach over and keep the car moving. Let alone open the car door and grab her wrist. It's impossible with a manual transmission. If he took his hand off the gear stick he'd stall the vehicle."

I scrutinise the jury – their pulses don't appear to be racing as horrifically as mine. The question which I suspect plenty of them are asking is: why would Tara scream if she'd never met him? How can she be screaming and my father be innocent?

Tara needed to take voluntary action for her clammy skin to stick to that upholstery. The abduction, if it happened at all, was consensual. Tara stepped into the car herself. This shifts a measure of responsibility on to her, but I hope

that no one else is thinking that even if she stepped inside, she had to get an invite.

The prosecution has no questions for the scientist.

The Judge calls an end of session. Mulcahy is the last to leave. He has incriminating neck fat patched over with a smattering of grey and black fur. He has explained to himself (while looking in the mirror at a certain angle) that it's a dignified image, because he can't accept why he really persists with the beard.

"Tara won't testify again," he tells me. "And that other stuff was solid. It's looking good."

I nod him a farewell. This is a secret – but when my ex-girlfriend Cath would cry it used to set me off, involuntarily. I was a flammable chemical caught alight by proximity. If she cried then I joined in. It was a humiliating mess. When you burst into tears without reason, as the man, it makes it extremely difficult to win fights. So I learnt to treat a sobbing person like a bug in a Petri dish, one that I could easily mount with a pin. But this display from Tara has me choked up like old times, because I know the more accurate reason for her hysteria. Mulcahy is chipper because he thinks Tara looks like a fraud and that the jury will think the same. Mulcahy doesn't know the problem. If my father is absolved from a simple grab of the wrist then it starts to chisel holes through to the true reason for why the girl could have been screaming.

I have been home less than an hour when Mulcahy calls my Gran's house. He's out of breath when Herb hands me the phone.

"Charlie boy!" Mulcahy chuckles. "I've got news," he yells like his sides are fit to burst. The explosion would plaster his office with two-for-one semi-digested dinners. The telephone cable is knotted. I tug sharply: frustrated. I need the length so I can lie flat down on the carpet, put my legs at right-angles.

"What is it?" I say, imagining my father hung dead by his neck in his cell, his face red like a boil that's about to pop.

"Well, I'm going to jump right in," he says. His voice is breaking with excitement. "I am minutes from meeting with your father." I sigh with relief. "I told his solicitor in London, naturally," he says. The barristers run the show in court, but they are beholden to keeping the solicitors happy. That's how they stay employed. "But I can tell you right now. You'll be the first civilian to know," he says. "Well, the girl has withdrawn her story. She says that she can't go through with it. She can't cope. She has had a big old think and is no longer sure of what happened," Mulcahy says. I see Tara, her lips turning blue at the duck pond.

In my silence I can hear the creak over the phone as Mulcahy leans back in his chair. "The state is continuing to press charges on her behalf. That is just par," he says.

"Well, that's great news," I say, as convincingly as I can. I hear the barrister's chair creak to resume its original position. Mulcahy is despondent that I'm not lauding him. I suddenly feel, despite our age difference, like he's expecting validation. It's expected that I thank him for a superlative job.

I consider that I should technically be congratulating my own efforts. This change from Tara must be because of my proposition at the duck pond.

The problem is now I've got what I wanted: her personal charges have been withdrawn, but I don't like how I got here. At first I assumed she was lying and urged her to tell the truth, whatever that may be. It wasn't my intention when I agreed to meet Tara to influence her, not properly. I just wanted to find out the truth concerning my father's innocence.

I stare at the ceiling, still lying on the crusted shag carpet. I'm holding one of my Grandfather's Rubik's Cubes. He was a massive fan and would collect the puzzles from jumble sales.

Mulcahy's newsflash frees my pelvis from the floor. I can see the ease with which I've caused such a destructive change.

# Chapter 11

Goodwin limps on to the stand. He has become a porridge avatar of the man he was a week ago.

“They say I won’t walk properly again,” he says, when asked about his hobble.

As the bones in Goodwin’s ankle have knitted together he’s cut out his initial rage. He tells his story in a distant monotone. The burning fight towards my father is gone. His dramatics have drained from his speech. He must have meditated over the possibility that he would rather lose this case than be victorious. He has to take one person’s word over another and winning will not leave him comfortable. He doesn’t want my father freed, but rather he wants to be told – without a shadow of a doubt – that his daughter was never taken. He wants to be told his daughter with black hair and frail bones – who would have failed to qualify for Viking abduction – couldn’t have captured the lust of an old Petit man.

Goodwin recounts the incident of his foot breaking, his daughter shrieking and pointing out the BMW. His new lack of emotion is as if he is trying to bore the jury, persuade them to be apathetic. He doesn’t want to win, but just wants them to give him peace of mind that he did all he could, as a father.

When the barristers threaten to begin their closing statements I can’t tolerate being in the court a second longer. I push through the double layer of doors, past the metal detector and out on to the steps. It’s better to be out in the brisk

sunshine than stuck listening to sombre men getting paid by the hour.

Regardless of whether I see the outcome of my father's trial it will still influence me. Instead, I can spend the precious time out here in the fresh air: breathing as deeply as my ribs can manage.

I crane my neck and choose a random window on the Crown Court building as Tara's: third floor up, second room to the left, the one with blinds, no curtains. She's in front of her monitor.

The sweat drips down my body inside my jacket, along the rivets of the scabs. The pain in my temple becomes unbearable. I lower my neck from the angle of Tara's assumed window. I take the bottle out of my pocket and knock two pills out on to my bandaged hand. I Hoover them up with my mouth, chewing them as quickly as possible, keeping my tongue uninvolved.

There is stillness in the tarmac as if the sparse configuration of cars and motorbikes are in a deliberate pattern. It's a message that I can't decipher: a Stonehenge wisdom that I can't quite grasp.

There is a girl who I mistake for Tara on the steps. She's waiting – as kids do – with zero agitation. She has resigned herself to hours of blank thought.

I watch her for a second, anticipating my voyeurism to end in a flurry once she spots me. She's 50 metres away and I imagine her plastic shoes scuffing, the occasional stone slipping through a hole in the end and getting caught under her white sock, smudging the fabric grey.

Mulcahy emerges from the court. He slaps a hand on the roof of the car as a greeting. The relief is contained around his eyes, in the motion of his breath.

“Your father has been acquitted,” he says, “due to lack of evidence.” I can’t prevent my tongue from folding up in my mouth – like everything suddenly tastes the same. What I feel, who I’m speaking to: it’s all been turned one-dimensional. I think of Tara’s puffy face.

“I knew they’d go for it after the girl’s testimony was pulled,” the barrister says.

I’m about to ask further questions on the trial, but he dodges my attempt by glancing behind me, towards the steps. My father walks out into the brisk sunshine. He squints in our general direction, too vain to wear glasses. What have I created, I think? We aren’t bringing home a man as innocent and affable as the courts have decreed. I sparked Tara to pull her testimony. Sure, it could be a sign of her lying from the start. But, whatever happens: if he’s guilty or not, incarcerated or not, the planned ending just burst like one of Tara’s grapes – spreading options everywhere.

Joyce squeezes the handle of the locked car door half a dozen times before I duck into the driver’s seat, lean across and pinch up the lock. She bolts in like a gas grenade has exploded. The reckless driving used during my father’s escape from the hydroponics shop means his licence has been suspended for two years – he will have to sit his test again.

The side of my head throbs as my father strides over. I shake his hand.

“Yes. Right,” he says with a chuckle, as if this is a quaint pedestrian custom.



I can't control the situation or the outcome now. I understand each of these players better than a jury or court, I remind myself.

The thin-lipped lady barrister materialises. Her dyed blonde hair clinks with metal from the clips and rods constructing her mane. My father's interest is prodded, as if he's to be attacked or aroused. With his senses heightened he waits for an introduction. He's oblivious to how her being a prosecutor in his child abduction case could be a turn-off. They might as well have met around the water cooler.

"He's going to prove to be a good little earner for your barrister, isn't he?" she says to me gesturing at my father, like he's a mule. "These guys don't usually pop in the once," she says and waves goodbye.

In the car my father has the posture and demeanour of a blow up safety man, the kind that comes in a suitcase and women like Joyce place on the passenger seat to give the illusion of having a partner to avoid hijackings.

I bend forward in the backseat as if trying to join a parents' conversation. "The girl's father, Goodwin, looked like an awful man, don't you think?" says Joyce. My father tenses his neck like a chicken hoping you won't get a grasp. Joyce is the abused wife who knows that if she gets struck one more time then she'll have grounds to leave him.

"I don't want to talk about it, actually," he says, singing the words. When my father is attempting to be charming he merely dodges topics that will aggravate. He raises his formidable eyebrows. I'm suddenly excited. This man is free. It feels like the return of an irreplaceable heirloom, a monkey's paw.

“But she was pretty, the girl, Joyce continues. “Not conventionally, but very young,” she says. My father sniffs as if tracking a scent. There are 40 years of shoe polish between them.

“In a harem everyone is happy. Or they can be,” says my father in the direction of the window. In the past he has shown me a diagram of the bed configuration for his harem. 12 single beds can fit in his cottage. Which bunk bed would Tara occupy? But instead of this chauvinism acting as pay-dirt for Joyce, it is oddly sad. “At least this is how love could work, I believe,” he says. It sounds as if his ideal has lost its bite.

In the silence I can hear the blood beating in my ears. My father is growing strong from our pity.

There’s no sign of graffiti or vandalism on the front of my Gran’s house: the townsfolk have been respectful for another day. I’d secretly applaud a garish, red “Paedo” across the front door at this point. It would relieve a measure of tension for it to be crassly out in the open. This is providing it wasn’t me who did the exposing.

Once inside, Joyce and I grin, trying to enjoy the moment. At the sound of my father’s tortured hello my Gran opens like an accordion. My father has taken the word “hello” and galvanised it beyond despair to produce an affable buzz. They are like wild animals meeting after a prolonged period. Both murmuring their vowels, my father has his hands on my Gran’s shoulders while they both avoid eye-contact. My Gran fixates on the coffee table, my father on

the frill of a cushion. He's still singing his greeting when he eventually pats her, scattering the flies.

Herb enters, an extra body crowding me. My step-Grandfather is not a bulky man, but to engage with him requires a tiring suspension of disbelief. He doesn't serve my father with chocolates, but a mug of green tea.

"Distilled," he says softly, referring to the water. My father has fitted this house and my own in London with distillers.

The crowding of this many bodies causes the dog to growl. With Herb in the mix its dumpy body is clearing six, seven inches – frustrated by the movement. Joyce points this out, how our hugging upsets the dog – and out of antagonism for the animal we put our arms around each other in a circle. I smell my father's tobacco. Joyce's head fits neatly under my chin. Herb follows suit last. We pull each other closer and the growling gets louder.

"You don't like that, do you Louie?" my Gran says, propped up in between me and my father. We stare not at each other, but at the dog, flapping our hands and telling him how tormented he is.

We are each handed a thimble of brown, treacle sherry. The drinks cabinet is carved with a non-descript warrior-type design that reminds me of Joyce's tattoo: the type that is easily sighted on several calves while queuing for your return flight to Gatwick.

My father is nonchalant: ignoring the true mechanics of that day in York with Tara. We aren't going to discuss the trial. When he was first arrested he was outspoken about the allegations. He was outraged. He maligned them as

crooks, as if he'd received horrific service from a bank. That disclosure has gone.

He's going to need a partner, I think, to buy him time and protect him from what's coming. There will be opportunities to help him indirectly, in a secret way, because though he's socially desolate, he's not prone to accepting help. He especially won't acknowledge assistance from his son, but there's a pregnancy out there that only I can help him with.

I wish we hadn't involved ourselves with Tara in that clandestine manner, those duck pond meetings. It was none of our business.

## Chapter 12

I turn on lights in the kitchen and the lounge. Our house is semi-detached, two bedrooms, but there's plenty of parking in the road. I crank up the dimmer so the stuffed maroon couch glows. Clutter, and even furniture, has been rearranged in my absence. Conservative tidying from a woman who has assumed that the progress she makes won't be reversed.

I open a bottle of organic, red wine. Marie and I met because she asked me to read out her ex-boyfriend's suicide note for a drama production. She performed to my narration of his note with a ladder, streamers and a leotard. It was when she was at her thinnest.

Marie knew I was arriving tonight. I've been away for a week. To step out with no message – though we're both modern, independent people – is oddly disconcerting. This neglect from my wife doesn't feel proper.

I decide to change my clothes and my dressings and head to the office. I've spent considerably more time on those pieces of grey carpet tile than in this house, and the preoccupation of tinkering with email would be cathartic. The Microsoft Machine is in my boot needing cables and a monitor.

As I step out of the shower I hear Marie's Toyota pull up. I dry myself roughly with a face cloth and get reminded how calmly a hairdresser will touch your head, or how a doctor will check your balls with seemingly not enough force to be thorough.

I continue to dress for the office during her sequence of entering sounds: the *ka-thump* of the Yale lock engaging and the dry tug of her re-checking the door. The *swoosh* of her coat pooling in the middle of the floor. A sniff like she's a child who's had games in the wet. The flick of a light turning off: if I enter a room the light goes on and it's never turned off. Marie comes home every day and undoes my handiwork without protest.

She walks in on me addressing my collar in the mirror. We watch each other's reflections for a second. She still has her freckles, which I adore and refuse to let her mother erase with her late Christmas present of a chemical peel.

Still watching my reflection Marie's hand reaches up to my cheek.

"Charlie, your face?" she says, almost as a statement and I frown wondering how she could forget the story, but it occurs to me that the first sight is a shock. She tilts her head to one side, as if assessing, soaking me in from a different angle. In truth she gets neck tension from sitting at a desk and is fidgeting for relief.

Our lips meet and it feels like passion. An impulse of it. Or a learned response. When Marie and I set about arousing each other a hand brushes up a skirt, there's a kiss on the neck. We contrive our chemistry. Left to our own devices both sides would stop spinning. There is an urgency that Marie could misinterpret as passion, but it's really a struggling frustration to squeeze out more enjoyment from what's around me.

Mentally I move to the outside. I look inward at my tongue touching hers. Usually after a kiss there's a frantic body check for an erection and a firm

declaration to myself that this is fun. There's no sign of these neuroses this time, or an erection.

I sit beside her on the bed in a shirt and turquoise socks pulled up the length of my calves. She mutes the television that's up high on a bracket, the cable coiling down, out the way, conserving space. We haven't utilized the space where the television would go with anything but its cable.

"So he got off," I say.

"I heard," she says. "So, can we expect this to be a family tradition, for the future?" she jokes. Look at Marie: all full of sass. And yet it hurts, I'm quietened, except I know that these scathing alerts are what I need. It's what I've missed.

We move to our plush grey armchair, reserved for worn clothes not soiled enough to be washed, and I explain the trial. My hand goes to her leg and she flinches when my wart rubs her skin through her dress. I mutter an apology and swap hands, but she's on the wrong side and my straining causes the affection to be unnatural, so my fingers quickly droop back into my lap.

It's curious how womanly she appears, like there's a texture to her facial expressions that wasn't there a week ago. Nervous with her maturity I kiss her. Peck at her like a fish cleaning the bottom of a tank.

Sometimes I believe that my ability to feel anything physical or emotional has totally vanished and it is the familiarity of Marie that is propping me up. Is mapping every crevice of Marie's mouth intimacy? If this is the case I might as well be sucking on a twig of wood, rather than kissing a different woman. I could lie in bed with another and stare at her, but what could she do to surprise me?

“Hang on a second,” I say in the middle of the story, as I’m reaching the part when he’s acquitted. It’s as if she’s invading me, like I’m going to volunteer more than I should. My ability to hold her at a distance is weakening – a reprieve that I would usually welcome.

I walk through to the en suite. We had the grouting redone last winter. The tiles were imported. There is still the outline of a deadbolt that I removed after lengthy discussions. I rub my finger over the unpainted strip of wood and it is strangely calming.

I stand by the toilet and wait – Marie still on the edge of the bed directly behind me. The bowl is an immaculate, foamy blue, as if done for my arrival. I put myself back into my boxer shorts, turn around and close the door.

As quickly as I’ve whipped around to face the bowl in private, my bladder relaxes. The stream clatters into the water as I survey the bathroom: tidy and clean, low-light, exactly the same.

I indulge a moment of depression, a brief spell, before bobbing up again. It’s not the magnitude of trauma that’s important but the habit of these visits. I have built a familiar world down there in the loathing, like being shown the network of germs on a sandwich under a microscope. It’s intricate, alluring and the slightest dip in mood can whisk me there where thinking is clean and regimented, miserable but familiar. It’s better constructed than my real life.

I tear off two sheets of toilet paper and wipe the edge – there is no splash, but those droplets are microscopic.



The dining table is set with candles. We usually slop down in front of the television, but I am like a guest today because of my sporadic attendance and this demands the correct protocol. I wish I could be appreciative, but it only feels that Marie is trying to make a snide point.

“What do you think of the food?” she asks, buttering another slice of bread, barely touching the chicken. *The Carpenters* plays at a sub-audible level, the tune scratching away.

“Delicious,” I say. I had a nightmare while in Yorkshire that Marie needed two replacement hips because of her deteriorating bone density. When her finger reaches into my mouth, during a moment of intimacy, I can’t help but imagine it sliding clinically down her throat.

“It was interesting having you away,” she says. “It’s our first time apart, I think, since we’ve been married.” I chew and pretend to ponder – but, of course, I know it is.

“How do you mean?”

“I’m worried you’ll laugh at me if I tell you this. In fact: I know you will,” she says.

“Okay,” I say. This is the line Marie and I reverberate along: she tells me how I’m an asshole beforehand.

“I did some growing.”

“In a week?”

“And thinking about the past. I want us to be equals,” she says. “Like we were.” There were never days when we were equal, perhaps ones when she was happier.

“How can you say you’ve changed and you also want it to be like the past?” I say. “Does that make sense, do you think?”

I sponge at the oil soaked plates, my knees pressed hard against the cupboard. The gunk is rapidly setting and hardening onto every surface. I load the dishwasher and marvel at how Marie and I have fought over how to pack this machine. The side plates in the bowl compartment have caused honest blood-spitting. And then we have proceeded to document the fight as an anecdote to mutual friends – while at a dinner party, packing a similar dishwasher. We chime in, as a duo, expertly with different parts of the tale. Laughing and delighting slightly drunk strangers in a loving way.

As the dishwasher whirs I move with Ewa across the lounge so we can lie together flat on the carpet. She’s gurgling and I’m practicing regulated breathing from a book I took from the cottage.

Marie has been walking methodically through each of the rooms – flicking off light switches.

“You’re killing the planet, Charlie, you know that?” she says, flicking the light on and off and on.

“Oh,” I say. I’m told that it’s custom for couples to fight if they’ve been separated for a day or two. It’s as if we’ve forgotten each other and it’s going to take a few stabs to resume.

What Marie and I found is that haircutting became a beautiful make-up ritual. She’d massage my scalp through the matted wet mess and hack away with a controlled violence. In the dark days I was sporting quite a buzz-cut.

“So you’re still going to do two sessions with David a week?” I say.

“Yes. He hasn’t said otherwise,” she says and instead of fleeing she turns closer to me. “Look, I’m not quite sure what you’re talking about,” she says. “Are you stressed? It’s understandable. I know you can get passive aggressive about this kind of thing,” she says. This is classic control: inquiring innocently if I’m upset when I’m trying to get my footing with an attack. She shrouds herself in concern, belittles my frustrations to vagueness and diffuses the idea that my problem is with her.

“Maybe we can sell the paintings. To pay for the sessions,” I say – it’s a feeble grapple. My mind is going in search of fault in the most likely of places. We have had dozens of complicated arguments and discussions about trust. With Marie I wanted to create a relationship that is a work of art – not to have a taunting piece of art in my lounge.

“Again? With the painting?” she asks. I think I agree to keep the painting around as a giant dartboard that I can hit when I’m frustrated.

She stands, her skinny hip bones jagged reminders that I need to be careful with my words.

“Charlie, what do you want?” she asks. Assertive, but weary. This is a peculiar moment, as if here is an opportunity for us to both step into new territory. I hesitate: where’s the audience? When you’re arguing the other person is rarely listening to what you’re saying. What’s the point of making devastating points if they are meanwhile planning their own attack? The wit is wasted on them. This is why I need an audience.

I look at Ewa. The baby is quiet with eyes wide, like it is sucking the sound out of the room. If she were older, I think, whose side would she take?

“There is no beauty here,” she says, heavy with having to live with someone who assumes the worst of her. And won’t trust her. And won’t take anything she says seriously. When you’re trying to demonize someone, or at least put them into an easy box to understand, then you lose what’s really happening. I only look to the bad – seeing polyps among freckles. I want to say that if I didn’t need the world to be untrustworthy then I wouldn’t have her with me.

“You are,” I say.

“What?” she asks.

“Beautiful,” I say, but I’d paused for a split-second too long. She laughs, this bitter, abrasive scoff that puts a gorgeous sheen to her hair. Her face is clouded in brown strands. All she has is good intentions. “Look Marie, let’s forget about it,” I say.

“You are as patronising as your family. Do you know that?” she says. Insights aren’t used for compassion anymore. They are challenging: ‘I figured x out. Do you hear how perceptive I am? Now what are you going to do about it?’ Your intimate knowledge is a way to put them off-guard, turn them accountable. When an argument-trope emerges the prevailing counter-notion is: how long have you been mad at me about this?

“What do you mean,” I say. “Marie. What do you mean?” I say again, but at the sound of my voice she bolts upstairs. Is she worrying about how long it’s been since she ate that bread? How much fat she’s digested? Is that where the

panic goes? The practicality should suspend my judgement. When her hair comes out in clumps should I be grateful that I could put a picture of her in a bikini on my office desk? I'm responsible. When she says her bulimia is "getting better", does she mean it is stopping or that she's getting better at hiding it? Or that it's becoming more enjoyable?

I hear the bedroom door open. I try to picture where she'll go first: the bedside drawer for a paracetamol, or the cupboard for her dry, scratchy exfoliation gloves? You fall in love with someone's secret world. The more gruesomely she's publicly perceived, the more you love that secret slice. The fibs she continues to tell over her university marks, or the girl she pretends to have had sex with when it was just a kiss, are not especially potent but the demarcation between what her friends and family know and the truths I'm privy to is rich and delicious and addictive. It's the exact trick my father has used on the members of his harem. When there's equilibrium of the private and public – what then?

Marie dumps my toothbrush and blanket on the landing and they roll sheepishly down a few stairs.

"Go put your head in the oven," she says into the vacuum.

"It's electric," I yell, but what should have been a cynical flattening of her outburst rattles in my throat. "Electric," I repeat. Ewa whimpers: she's never audacious enough to cry.

I've yanked the locks from all the rooms (bathrooms and bedrooms) so my wife can't technically shut me out. It's disgusting, sure, but the deception is worse. Hundreds of silent bathroom moments stack up to erode her credibility.

I walk over to the bundle, my wine cradled in my hand. My mind and emotions are blank, like my father's smell. I'm happy for the simplicity of the silence. I pick up the toothbrush from the blanket – the new one I brought back from Yorkshire. I pop the toothbrush dry in my mouth. It is rough and intrusive against my tongue. I suck the fluff from the bristles. It has remained excitingly firm.

There was a point, during the fight, where I could've talked about Tara and the pregnancy. I could have given her more support, told her niceties, but I was irritated. What does it mean if I'm not as tolerant as I think? All I need to do is smile and kiss and pat, after all, and I know that I'm good at that.

The truth is I don't want Marie to know she's correct about my father. She could run rampant, thinking she knows best. With secrecy it feels the predicament is still manageable, being controlled by a person with a clear head.

I suck harder on the brush, the plastic gouging into my palate. What I need from Marie is an acknowledgment that this scenario wasn't always the case. A mind has been altered. I'm terrified of the world being changed incrementally, like the shrinks in Roald Dahl's *The Twits*. Opinions will swirl, people will talk and eventually everything will be different and I will be the same. It will be as if I teleported somewhere else and I'll be alone except for the grief of not knowing what's going on. For Brenda, my mother, changing your mind is a travesty. It is an exclusive pastime of my father. Though, his perspective is one of stasis while the world forever refreshes.

I drag the blanket across the lounge. Would this scenario be covered in my diaries? I remember they weren't such catalogues of events, but manuals.

That kid put in the effort to try and save me. Keeping the writing legible would cramp his hand but he persevered. Each diary listed painful, fiddly self-awareness of what not to do once an adult. While other kids were planning their escape from home, I was safeguarding my future. I was building a city from tiny matchsticks imagining one day when I would shrink to the perfect size and live there. And yet I passed into a marriage ignoring the advice, not reading a word, afraid of it being terrible, childish rubbish. Then what would help me? The pencil could have faded or the pages damaged yellow. They've become a carrier for what I could lose rather than their actual usefulness which to this point has been nil. To think that there isn't a solution anywhere is too much to bear. It's better to think I am ignoring wisdom, and it is safely in a box, than have nothing.

## Chapter 13

I get Tara's message while at work. I absently tear off a lobe of Blu-Tack and thumb it over the blinking light on my phone. It is to indicate a waiting message. I lean back as casually as I can without kicking my father's Microsoft Machine that I humped under my desk. My leather heel nudges the computer. There is a red glow around the seams of the putty.

I straighten in my chair. There's expectation in my gut. My father's Microsoft Machine is old and heavy. To lumber it into the office I had braced the weight across my forearms and the box had come to my chin. Colleagues had opened doors with suspicion, as they'd seen me struggle, and I'd given a smile, turned up at the edges but showing no teeth. This was not my problem, the smile said, but I was making the best of it. Security men had checked the laminated card hanging around my neck.

"I've been here 13 years," I said. Stubble had given way to a patchy beard since my security photo. At 29 I now get mistaken for an immature 35-year-old, a two-folded insult which I interpret as having the decrepit looks of a man six years my senior but lacking the dress sense or emotional muscle to compliment that age.

At the office I can't fiddle with the air conditioning or disrupt the days the plants are watered, but it has been my fortress for 13 years. I once delivered mail to the desk I now call my own and I know the location of every fire exit. I have been in this building more years than the Financial Director and CEO combined. I would shower here if I could and I already blatantly take the office



newspaper into a gents stall, the one closest the wall, before anyone else gets a read.

I roll the sticky putty into a tiny ball that is easily crushed with my thumb and forefinger and allow the red light to blink. I stare into the red, defiantly refusing to retrieve the message.

I plug my office monitor into my father's Microsoft Machine swapping my desktop for his. His arrangement of icons reminds me of his cottage: packed with all his interests in seemingly no order.

There are no images. The York police force had scanned the Microsoft Machine and confirmed that. I wouldn't be surprised if they'd run a program used for anti-spamming that checked for beige, brown and pink colour tones in jpg files. Early versions of that software meant consumers could view black people engaging in underage sex, no problem.

I instead target the chat programs, social networking – his password is mostly the word “password” or his surname.

An office cleaner – one that I don't recognise – potters in and out of the fluorescent glare. I maintain a forced blank expression when I find a photo of two nail-polished feet. Clearly self-taken, she has pointed the camera directly south. Ten pitch black toes.

The light is still flashing. I crack under the pressure and retrieve the message. It's Tara. She simply says “Hi” and hangs up. She'd found out where I work from the business card I gave Goodwin when Joyce and I tried to storm their house uninvited. .

Confused and desperate I pack the Microsoft Machine away. I remove

the cables and disconnect the power.

Nervously I approach the office manager and ask if I have any lunch time meetings. The lady with cheeks the texture of orange peel says no. It reminds me that my father would grind orange peel to an acidic mush and put it in his cocktails, when he was my age.

I return to my sandwich crushed under the plastic wrapping. The mayonnaise has oozed out to the side and is trapped in a pattern that will be ruined upon opening.

I see, with a mouth full of bread, that I've been sent a message. *Click. Click.* The profile picture of the sender is of two nail-polished feet. The black capped toes resemble her deathly fringe. The message Tara has sent me – by searching for my name – says, “I need ur help. It's urgent. Can't ask my father. I read that it already has got eyelids. I want to get rid of it. x.”

I close my Internet browser and open it again. I watch a lank IT boy from across the office. He is wielding a confidence that he has no feasible right to possess. He flicks his *Tintin* mop as the girls canoodle him. He has a set of office keys. The lowliest positions have access to the most expensive toys. I click through the menus until I figure out how to delete my history, proceed through the precautions and then go back to double check that it has all gone.

I pretend to ponder why she contacted me. The reason is, of course, obvious: I'm the version of my father she was expecting to arrive in the BMW. I'm the picture of what the Internet chatting between them had painted in her mind: younger and yet more of the fatherly stereotype.

In an office job you aren't allowed to freak out. It would cause

embarrassment. I just sit and ponder how emphatically you need to blow on a painted toenail for it to dry.

Brenda is grey and deflated. Her home has a low brick wall and a “Beware of the dog” sign – but no animal. She’s out in the renovated garage, surrounded by boxes of posters and an IBM PC. The hard drive beeps and twitches its metal arms together with the sound of exciting games about to be played. There’s an instrument that looks like a corkscrew on her desk.

Ewa is wrapped against my chest. Our body warmth is shared.

“How’s my little princess doing?” Brenda asks, attempting to stroke my daughter’s cheek. The mark she’s made on the child is confirmed by Ewa’s tiny hand nabbing up at the woman’s brooch.

My mother paws through boxes, like a librarian. My old Golden Harvest tobacco tins line the shelves, donated, washed and reused to store staples and drawing pins. A photo of a school kid in a straw boater and khaki socks is balanced on her monitor. The rest of the house is pristine, but this section is her organised chaos. The poster she slides out of her file has a baby’s head clasped between forceps, a strand of indiscernible tissue dangling where its body should be.

“That’s a bit much,” I say.

“Oh, of course, sorry,” she says.

When Brenda first heaved a box down and presented me with a bundle of “literature” I was 17. She assured me that one gets jaded. Until then Brenda had

been cagey about her anti-abortion practices, she had run the borough's headquarters from her garage, but indulged in no discussion.

The following October, I raided the boxes. There were posters, with simple slogans: "*Abortion is Murder*"; "*Pro Choice / Pro Murder*". Others were dustbin shots of babies fully formed. I stole a picture of the chubbiest baby and pinned it to my chest. I had taken into account the ease of a last minute Halloween costume and my mind had snagged on a pro-life supporter. They were terrifying people and it was a suitable antidote to the usual zombies, ghosts and vamps.

As Brenda had broadcast to me the horror of my father, I suppose I wanted to portray her dearest vocation as horrific.

The costume was a success. I drenched a doll from the local toy shop in red food colouring and smeared it with Vaseline. I dropped it in a bucket which I carried for the entire party. Brenda never found out.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

"I'm fine," I say, at that point coughing.

"You sound croaky," she says. One of my mother's traits is the way she carves up her sympathy. If I say I'm genuinely depressed she laughs, just cackles away like it's the most amusing anecdote in the world, but if I say that I have the flu she will open up with compassion. "I'm so sorry," she says.

"It's nothing," I say, not wanting to dwell on an insignificant sniffle. I should feel grateful, but there is a paranoid reaction to the fact that this selective sympathy is keeping me sick. Fathers can cover car maintenance, willies and

other men – but not usually other men’s willies – while the matriarch needs to listen. But you can’t fiddle with her responses. It’s too late to train her. This inverted discrepancy between a genuine problem and sweaty flu... I have to see her concern as fluid, interchangeable. I cough again.

“We shouldn’t have had you in that incubator,” she says leaning back into the IKEA fold-out. “But once you were in there you didn’t want to come out,” she says. Brenda blames her mothering to the point of public derision. “Prem babies,” Brenda will say. “Ten weeks. I should have kept my legs crossed.”

“Cup of tea?” I ask, tinkering. The sugar is balancing on a box of posters. This garage is her headquarters.

She says she’ll have a coffee so she can put a splash of Kahlua around the brim. I reach into the top kitchen cabinet, above the microwave, for the liquor.

Brenda pulls her dressing gown together in a way so different from how Marie would have done it that I barely recognise it as the same gesture.

She accepts the mug and has an obvious fear of the coffee’s heat on her lips that endears her to me a little. She puffs to cool it down.

It’s my father who started my mother drinking. As a couple they chipped every glass and mug in the house by banging on the rims with wine bottles, trying to shake out the last few drops. I went through a phase of throwing any chipped crockery or glassware in the bin. Even better: thrashing it down on the floor. A fragment once ricocheted and sliced Cath in the ankle. She made an extraordinary fuss, but that was the only time I hurt her. Now I find the sensation

of a chipped glass placating, the slight tinge of blood in the mouth tastes like home.

“He’s been released then,” I say, as if commenting on a story in the paper.

“Yes, thank God,” she says, but she isn’t smug or relaxed. I suppose now she has to recover the burden of punishing him personally. Alone again in her resentment, she has to remind herself vigilantly of what he did to her so at least he stays punished with her spite.

“St. Mary’s of Market Weighton will be resuming their prayers, no doubt,” I say and Brenda laughs. Her breath is a creamy bitter.

“What do you want with all that?” she probes, pointing at the “literature”. Until now I’ve maintained a passivity on the abortion issue, not agreeing or disagreeing with her.

“A friend of Marie’s requested them,” I say and try staging a guilty look hoping my mother knows me well enough to see that I’m lying.

In the designated kitchen corner I pinch out several sweetener packets and a plastic stirring wand. My blood sugar cycles are wrecked – the absence of Herb’s stale bread and sweet hot drinks has left me craving food at times that I can’t anticipate.

“Plenty of change since you’ve been here, hasn’t there?” Brenda says gesturing at the boxes and I feel defensive, like she’s making fun of me. My mother and I have this game where I’m meant to scandalize her. I’m to goad her with my honesty and try to push her until she loses faith, interest or love for me.

I've exposed my marriage's sex problems in this guise, admitted that I was on anti-depressants and now I have a huge bomb to drop.

Brenda slurps at her elixir. Ewa has a new tooth which she scrapes into a digestive biscuit.

"Do you have an envelope for the literature?" I ask. With a First Class stamp it will be in Market Weighton before Thursday.

"Of course," she says. She potters around for a clean envelope I can reuse. The glue is spotted and the address is crossed out. I slide the anti-abortion literature inside. As the horrors are covered I know that I can't tell Brenda about the pregnancy. The irony is that for my father's benefit Brenda would agree to a fixing. He's the one man she would make an allowance for. She'd know which clinic to call and how to circumvent the bureaucracy and get on the right list with a good doctor. But after she agreed to help her practice of activism would crumble. Or perhaps raise her to a remorseful, more feverish pitch of devotion. But either way she would cry and this would start me off. I feel so similar to this woman if I told her this secret, involved her, then I'd lose sight of what makes us different. I'd lose who I am. Asking for the pamphlets, humouring her, maintains decorum, makes her happy, but keeps us distant.

I rub Ewa's soft, conditioned hair. The daylight of English midday shines through her strands. It reminds me of my father's hair when he removes his hat.

I unfold off the couch and step into my jeans – they're in a pool on the floor. The couch has scuffs from my feet and a dilapidated arm from my head. I thought I heard a tap at the front door, quiet but hurried.

Doing only the top button on my fly I step into our bedroom – there’s a smell of damp towel.

I rake my hands through the empty side of the double bed. There are clothes, a laptop bag. Marie usually warms my side of the bed while I’m finishing my wine downstairs. She rolls into the cold and offers up the toasty side as I lift the covers. Her sudden iciness is an excuse for her to cling to my warming body. Tonight she’s arced up against the wall, touching an exposed foot against the plaster.

I toss a blanket up and clear the rest of the clutter from the folds. She looks up at me suddenly, confused. It’s as if whatever I can throw at her she’ll take. Her boldness didn’t work and she can’t keep going on as before. I’m attached to a 30-year-old who wants to be punished. She craves the disapproval so then she can clean away her guilt. Instead, I hold her leg tight through the blanket. The layers create an impression that she’s swelled.

“Sorry,” I say.

“I don’t know why I act like that. I’m going to look into it,” she says. Her eyes close and she pulls away from the wall, stretching her lithe arms across the width of the bed.

“I love you,” she says. I massage the top of my neck with my ring and forefingers. I admire the outline of the TV cabinet, running my finger down its edge. I hand-built it from scratch last winter and the wood I used was mostly off-cuts, but you can’t tell.

“I love you too,” I say. The time of hysterics has waned, now tears act as a defeated flag to be pulled out when she’s had enough and wants to go to



sleep. It's a quiet breaking point to signify everyone should give in. Fights used to start with crying and escalate from there. Now we have a far more WWI understanding – she calls it off and we have tea out on the mound. Perhaps a game of football. There is an understanding that we'll be here again soon and we should fill the space between with sleep and quiet. Usually whatever Marie says in the argument will be astoundingly cruel and so give me licence to be upset, forgive her and thus harbour a swell of gratitude for her before we reunite. This time, though, she was more mature.

When I think of what my father has done to Tara's frame through Marie's eyes I am appalled and then confused with myself that I need Marie to see what should be so obvious. Perhaps because my father has impregnated a young girl and allowed me to realise that I have – in a manner – done the same.

I think of Tara unwrapping Brenda's pamphlets, excited about what the parcel from London could be, and know that there's another option.

Marie would hate me if she knew that my father had produced this child and she'd never let me – if she knew – partake in organizing an abortion.

I go downstairs and open the front door. There's an icy shock of air as I creep the door open. Whoever knocked has scampered off. He's probably hiding in a bush and watching me stand outside, half asleep in the middle of the night. He must be finding it hilarious.

## Chapter 14

Joyce is down on her haunches. She's under the summer swing with her back to me. Her denim jacket is folded into a foamy, red-tinged bucket off to the side of the patio.

She's whispering. As I approach, I see Louie is contorted at the midsection with his snout pushed into the tile. Joyce has her hand in Louie's thicket, rubbing her hand deep into his fur. Her fingers are pulling at congealed hair, clumps of skin, spilt food and sputum. These are the cakes of debris the animal has rolled up in its life from sharing a house with my Grandma and Herb. For two old people as they wane in health Louie is a hospital chart.

"Where's Gran?" I ask. She hadn't been in her lounge recliner and I'd followed the incongruous breeze through the bungalow. The house is light and spacious as if to be sold, but with a menace from the uncertainty of a new owner. You draw the curtains, brew the coffee beans and lose control over what could happen next.

"She's phoning in the bedroom," Joyce says, still squatting. Walking into a crisis I realise how I came here to be welcomed and praised. I have become accustomed to my Gran and her doting, but Louie has died (somehow) and left the family fractured, ready to abandon their posts.

Joyce stands abruptly: Herb is in the doorway. Step-father and step-daughter face each other. The three of us then stare at the dog. Joyce flexes her knuckles like a guilty child and Herb holds nothing but disappointment as he shuffles silently into the house. It is a graceful father-daughter moment. An

opportunity they've both been starved of in this prissy, all-adults relationship. It's an increase in closeness that will let Joyce go for his jugular.

A ruckus from the hall: my father is heaving Tesco bags through the tiny door. Joyce is drawn to my father as he tinkers with his shopping. I stay by the animal. My pulse quickens and I retain balance by flailing for a grip on the swing. Metallic splinters cling to my forefinger. Grandfather James oiled this swing once a week and Vincent would have continued the task. Fifteen years later the workmanship has been left to ruin.

My father steps out with a tea towel slung over his left shoulder. He catches me trying to push the swing to its limit. The metal shrugs and specs of rust coat my hair. I want to bust the prongs out of their holes.

There's brushed stubble across his chin. He prods the animal with the edge of his shoe. Louie the dog tilts slightly. I slow the contraption down and hop off the swing to stand beside him. My father raises an unruly eyebrow at me. There will be no reincarnation, it seems, for Louie. My father's lack of involvement is a sign of sanity. He is a cruel dismissive pensioner and if we were two men then this could be a charming moment: sneering our noses at the bustle. But neither of us wants to see the other as a man: either a boy or a monster, but not a man.

I want to say "Tara". Just her name – the question of "why" boiled down – would be enough. For a man who demands honesty, it's suffocating to be so careful with what you're able to say.

I follow him to the kitchen. It's been almost two weeks since we met at the duck pond and Tara's baby is growing at a rate of 18.9 grams per day.

Herb rocks in my Grandfather's chair. This is where the dead man perused his *Reader's Digest* and pinpointed words in his dictionary. Herb never reads – but he finds the rocking conducive to dozing while listening to the radio.

Joyce has wrapped Louie in two black plastic bags. Her white hair is in unkempt sprouts.

"It was the chocolate," Joyce hisses to me when Herb has slunk off to the bedroom. "He was feeding Louie real cocoa. Dogs can't digest Quality Street, it impacts in their colon."

I'm disinterested with the dog. Its death feels so pointless. I go outside to call Tara and act surprised that I can't bring myself to dial the number. I keep walking towards the centre of town asking myself what the problem could be with making the call. There is a slow sickening notion of what this phone call could represent. I am growing myself into a rogue patriarch by eradicating life instead of providing. I'm going to intimidate a girl into having an abortion? Is that as bad as sleeping with her? Surely, if I take initiative with this procedure then my meddling will be as consensual as when she was with my father.

The seven feet nine inches of William Bradley, the tallest man to be born in England, is absent from Market Weighton's quad. The knee-high wooden fence remains. The sign asking folk to refrain from vandalizing has a juicy spray-paint tag across it and the security camera is now a yellow wire poking from the ground. To do any of this would mean walking on the quad's grass, which is forbidden.

I avoid eye-contact with the pram mums who pass. There are many. I have 13 years of sick leave stacked up, but the office has already called. Days of holiday have been mysteriously recycling with no reward but a shoulder slap.

I walk past Tara's house, hoping to find her miraculously as I had that day when she came off the bus. There's a fever in my mind that suggests if I push hard enough, if I imagine vividly, then cosmically my want will be answered. Within the delusions it seems unfeasible to shift my father's actions. I can't imagine the rape not happening, but I can see Tara chewing on contraceptives, preventing the pregnancy that way. She is flexing her tongue in dismay at the acidic taste, though I don't know truthfully what contraceptives taste like. And this delusion, at this moment, is more real than what I'm staring at: the shoddily cut grass on Goodwin's lawn.

My father and I meet later at his cottage. He retreats to his bedroom and I scoop CDs off the floor: scores of Lou Reed on the left, *Wings* on the right.

It feels like I am searching for clues. I'm looking for something that will inspire me to protect my father to the extent that I'll force this girl to have an abortion. I'm looking for something that will inspire me to love him enough.

There's simplicity to how my father has decorated the cottage. His keyboard dominates the lounge and there's a boxy portable television in the corner.

The picture frame in the loo is still empty. I thought he would have replaced it with another painting: a socially acceptable scene that would ease my mind to think the one before was a coincidence. But the purpose for the

frame has been stolen and so it is empty besides the price tag of £4.99 in the centre – you could construe that he framed three numbers with a generous grey border.

While my father is sleeping I find a *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Heart Club Band* suit in the cupboard, a distinct collection of plasters and ointments and an impressive stack of hand written manifestos from when he ran for local office as an independent MP. I hazard a glance through his manifesto. I survey the finer points of his credentials.

Standing for local council was my father's moment in the limelight, one less notorious than the one he's in now. He hand wrote, with his pens, each and every manifesto. It stated, as clearly as his hand writing would allow, that women were secondary citizens and a lot of the world's digressions were from men and women trying to fight this conceit. Despite this, or because of it, he reaped a third of what he sowed. He got a fraction of the votes for the area, a mere 332, much to Joyce's relief. However, his archaic method of hand-scribing and delivering the manifestos personally meant that only a thousand were produced. This was before he purchased his Microsoft Machine. So a third of potential voters were swayed. Reading his policies it's clear why the allegations over Tara were so naturally accepted by his neighbours.

I can hear that my father is awake and is partaking in his ablutions. This can trap him in soapy routines for hours. With his deprived water allowance (it must all be distilled) he still manages to slosh around like a contented kid.

He eventually bounds downstairs, energetic and lobster pink from the scrubbing. As he comes towards me I consider the pregnancy and how close to her he's been.

I bend, with difficulty, into an armchair opposite him. When I awoke this morning I was dead on the table. My spine, hips, neck and skull were one moulded piece of plastic – mass produced in China and shipped out here with no foresight or care for what toy I might be needed for.

My father is, by contrast, alert, like a deer. He twitches and his neck occasionally snaps to give him a new angle of the room as he gathers information.

He knocks a cigarette out of a pre-packaged box. There is no weed scattered in the crease or chubby filter held in his lips while his fingers rub at the thin paper as if it were a rolodex. He's not rolling his own anymore. Time to him, on some level, has become precious.

"Should we go. Then?" he says, ghettoising the last word of his sentence. "I'll fetch my guitar."

My father walks ahead of me on the pavement. His guitar is strapped around his shoulders. I need to perform two steps, assisted by the umbrella, for every one of the older man's strides. Jail has tightened his fitness, given a nervous crackle to his muscles so they clench when steady and are relieved when in motion.

This sudden determination from my father is admirable. His slugs are going to allow him an attempt at normal life. Tonight he is performing music on stage. Of course, the slugs don't know about the pregnancy. They are granting

him relief for his 57 years of insanity, but really, unless I do something, it's a fairground trip before the cancer truly takes hold.

I catch myself pulling my attention away from the pavement to be sure he hasn't eloped and that I'm still in tow.

Wednesday is open mic night. My father raises a finger to signal he's going to need a few more minutes. I wait by twisting the paper menu deeper into the pint glass.

He twiddles the knobs, plucks the strings, smiles sheepishly, twiddles, plucks, smiles. Drops the plectrum. I sit at a table – nursing a beer, not wanting to get drunk – watching my father tune his guitar.

His first is a Lennon track – from his solo *Imagine* era. I clap, joined by a couple along the bar.

Mothers can construct the personalities of estranged fathers to their whim. Brenda was thorough with my father's biography – leaving little room for imagination or empathy. His passion for music, though, was coloured with reasonable affection. My father's first band was called *The Habits*, he was 15-years-old and they did mostly blues. But a pertinent detail was that my father chose his music over his family. The fairy story I grew up with – the mythology that bound my mother and me – was my father prioritised drugs, friends and his guitar over us.

I know that I'm belittling my younger self by offering my father support. My concessions to contact him, since the wedding, have left me a fraud. He got to run out, take drugs, pay sporadic post-dated cheques and still cash-in on an



adult father-son friendship. I'm putting on a sham of forgetting the past for some cheap intimacy time. But what I remember as a moral high-ground when I was a teenager was mostly a lack of options. The truth is there was no choice to buckle ten years ago, he wouldn't have answered my calls, which makes being pious in hindsight easy. Now he's ladling out his time and I have the comfort to criticise.

As you would, I want to examine the shortcomings of his performance. Sitting in this bar is like being invited to watch your wife fellate another man, on stage. You're helpless to complain. The worst you can hope for is she gets grazed knees.

It's obvious, as he ploughs into the second verse of *Jealous Guy*, that he is God close to tone deaf. He drags his voice through the lyrics, stumbling over the chords. Lacking the guts to feign professionalism he acknowledges each mistake with a frown, as if timid for a crowd.

He thumbs his way through a *Doors* track and then a Bowie number – crowd pleasing to a smattering of middle-aged men, but he barely gets a courteous glance up.

My childhood is worth less than a performance that only I am loyal enough to endure. In my moments of self-loathing I believe that my father isn't sick but is faking. He was Achilles going to war, feigning madness – willing to throw away his name and honour, anything to avoid raising a child. Here he is trying to tell me that he didn't leave for the music. I expected a Hendrix – that would have made his absconding significant – but under the guise of a friendly invitation to an open-mic he is laying out the chance for me to see, in no

uncertain terms, how he was a rational, cowardly man who had no interest. His neglect wasn't worth learning the fluid order of a few guitar chords.

He finishes and brings a ginger ale to the table. I'm tearing up beer mats. There's something wrong when you can't express anger with someone – when it has to be on their terms. You care for someone's safety in a basic way, but you don't necessarily want to be kind or talk to them. Luckily for him and Brenda they had me for a son. I have spent my life nursing these adults, curbing their expectations.

"Mum told me music was your passion," I say as the next performer steps down to a chequered but warm applause.

"I was in a band, but it didn't work out," he says.

I want to ask him if he could be a father again, if he would dote on my step-brother or step-sister fuelled by the guilt of neglecting his first born. I will accept any level of depravity this incident can reach if he admits it.

With my beer draining – almost as quickly as his ginger ale – we sit in the silence of when only one man is drinking and you know that another beer would distance you further away from each other. An ostracising pint of amber sounds perfect, but my father stands and I, broken from staring into the lurking foam, follow.

We stand on the pavement. The street light silhouettes my father's jagged profile. I take hold of his wrist carefully, skimming against his gloves and the cuff of his jacket. My thumb and middle finger touch, having wrapped entirely around. I am his only friend, I think. The only person he can speak to, who hates him for what he's done, knows what he is and won't leave.

There's an embarrassment suddenly in being caught beholden to my father's well-being when I have no tangible reason to care. He hasn't shown me reasons to love him, but given me hooks for me to hang feelings of being responsible off. It's a terrifying experience. It's like being one of Ewa's dolls after being mistakenly tossed in the washing machine. My button eyes are going to be ripped off in the mechanism. But this is a stable position I can grasp. I'm essentially his parent, proudly assessing him and compelled to help.

The options I can see are, one, Tara has the baby and there is a public outrage, possibly a new trial and then imprisonment for my father. Two, Tara has the baby and hands it over wholesale to the harem in secret. Sacrifice brings the women (Joyce, Brenda and my Gran) closer together. Tara gets mollycoddled by these women. They keep her in school and raise her child as their own. To me this seems like a worse fate for Tara than being clumsily attacked by my father. The new baby gets presents and love. Joyce and her brother stay friends forever.

This second option fills me with a jealous pain. The fucked up utopia makes me think that it's happening again, a second family harem is forming. Brenda and I had to live out the first one by ourselves, just the two of us. I try to ignore these selfish concerns – but I can see how this Tara baby is going to trap me out of a next generation. My father will no longer be interested in my wife and my kids. He will sit in the centre of his new family and won't need me and I will return to London and Marie. My wife will make nothing of it but harsh irreverent jokes at parties about how my family are rapists.

Then, of course, there is a third option.

## Chapter 15

“Well let’s look at the damage shall we?” says the kindly, old doctor. There is a sticky trepidation with removing my bandages. He slowly unwraps the fabric so it transfers from my hand to his. “You know what I remembered the other day?” he says. I shake my head, transfixed by my hand. “Your father’s caravan,” he says, with outrageous pep in his voice.

“Really, sir?” I say, “That thing is long gone. What made you think of it?”

“Well, this hand is looking good,” the doctor says, finishing with the bandage.

“What made you think of it?” I repeat. He scoots away on his chair, the wheels taking him to the sink where he fiddles with an implement. The doctor peers at me as if we have no history, as if no death has punctured my family.

“Oh, no reason. I remember your father being very fond of it that’s all,” he says, rolling up the dirty and unnecessary cloth from my face.

My wounds have scabbed over, healed away from the surface, but I’m watching the doctor’s averted eyes, hungry for him to look up.

I want to be injured like Joyce, I realize, in a way that can forever be appreciated. It’s why I garnered an existential joy out of the pub beating. It’s out there for people to see. But if I staged an accident it could be shown – as it has been with Joyce – that people are willing to lose interest in the blatant misery of others.

“There’s something I need to ask you, Doctor,” I say. I think of Tara and it’s like watching a child on a sugar rush, about to collide with a glass French

door. “There’s a girl I know.” The man is scrubbing his hands and I realise that I can ask him this because of his reputation. The peer group believes this doctor to be a murderer. As a Petit I wouldn’t want to take a stand without a semblance of social support – like checking that a man can’t spell before damning his intelligence. I wouldn’t be able to ask any other doctor, any other person. “She’s very sick,” I say. He uses his elbow to turn off the tap and holds his hands up so they drip dry. This is what a transaction feels like.

“What’s her age?”

“Twelve,” I say, barely able to speak.

“And lives in the town?” he says.

“No,” I say, with a pause. “She’s visiting.”

I pull my hand into a fist. The skin is tight like a leather glove. A surreal despondency sweeps in. I think of telling the doctor that I have this “literature”. He might take a read and change his mind. He hasn’t asked me how I know her? What is she sick with, exactly? Or if this is the girl who prosecuted my father and I’ve built a relationship with?

The doctor holds out his hand. It’s for me to shake, I think. As men do. This is the hand that didn’t write the correct prescription for my Grandfather. When our hands touch what I’m doing makes sense: you get appreciated – truly – by acting in someone else’s interest. I’m trying to help my father, I think. But with that thought is an image of Marie nursing Ewa in a way she couldn’t because her nipples were cracked. My wife is cradling our baby in a careful domesticity. In the background are lovingly painted anti-allergy walls.

The good parts of my life have existed as parts of other people's stories, laboriously maintained: if Marie or Brenda find out about Tara and her baby, these precious images will be shattered. I think of Marie wiping her horrified face after hearing the news and the burgeoning harem of my mother and Joyce behind her.

The tears skid into my eye-sockets with the doctor's hand still held out in front of me.

"I would take it easy for a couple of days," the doctor says.

The procedure is to help Tara, I think. As a last resort, if she doesn't co-operate I imagine a scenario where I have to sneak into her house. Tara would buckle at the knees and crumple onto those cold ceramics in her kitchen from the drugs. She'd scuff her left side on the kitchen counter. The drugs would take twenty minutes on a girl of those dimensions. There would be broken glass stuck in her hair from whatever she was drinking. It would shatter with the fall and the fragments would cling to her hair by her own oily red lipstick. A smear would have been left across the glass's rim.

I'd rake the worst of the glass from her mane. Tiny shards of glass would get caught in the ridges of my fingerprint. I'd brush it from behind her ear. There were two holes in each of her lobes. Her breath would be soft on the back of my hand. I'd touch her neck and the skin would be tight on her collarbone.

I'd lay her down and straddle her chest: slotting a hand under each of her armpits to drag her on to a couch, while we waited for a doctor. The baby would be the size of a bread bun, so weight wouldn't be a problem.

This time when I call there is no tension and no doubt that she'll answer.

"Hello," the tiny voice says.

"Hello?"

"Charlie?" she asks. My concern is close to anger but even with a 12-year-old girl my inclination is to contrive for her to feel sorry for me.

"You asked me to come up here," I say. No answer, besides her squeaking breaths. "I've made an appointment with Dr. Canker for Saturday morning. 11am. Will you meet me there?" There's no answer. "Can you do that?"

"Yes," she says.

By noon I suspect that Tara isn't coming. I stare at the closed door of the doctor's clinic, through the section of glass not plastered with paper, and get sunk with a need for Marie. If Tara can flit away so easily then so can she, obviously.

I walk into the doctor's office and the old man is looking behind me to see a girl, fraught and afraid – but there's only me.

I present the wart on my ring finger to the doctor. The nub of hard flesh is clawing on my resources – building a city.

"Might as well, while I'm here," I say.

"I have to order the liquid nitrogen in advance. The man comes on Tuesdays and Thursdays," he says, turning his chair on me. I stand in the

entrance to his clinical outfit. There's the rubber bed where Tara would have sat.

"How was my Grandfather, towards the end?" I ask. The doctor isn't startled. He continues to tinker as he talks.

"He was efficient for an admirable stint. He was amazing, really, but eventually he couldn't bend his neck down to see if he was properly stirring your Grandmother's tea," he says, cutting off a bandage that hangs limply from my temple. "He took up residency on the couch in the front room. And, of course, in those days his brother was around to help. Vincent took the lion's share of the housework. It was a struggle for your Grandfather to lift his legs as the biscuit crumbs were being sucked up around him."

"My Aunt Joyce thinks he was misdiagnosed," I say.

"We put our anger where it serves us best," he says.

How can I not take it personally that Tara hasn't arrived? This is a procedure we were going through together. We wanted the same outcome: for the world to be sensible.

How do I change what she wants? There are such complications in trying to control her further.

On my second lap of the town I spot Tara arguing. I expect, by her hand on the hip, that it's with a boy, but I can't be sure.

I clatter, off the high street, into the Post Office. I have a fatherly agitation – as if I want to assert and shout the problem away – but I know this requires finesse.



Tara pulls the boy close to her, towering over him. She's a vandalised William Bradley. I assume the two children are of a similar age but he looks like he's been compressed. He isn't a romping, pierced teen. He looks scrubbed and manufactured, as if he wouldn't come fitted with an erection, let alone the capacity to reproduce.

There's a Post Office assistant present who is mostly hidden behind a gigantic scale to weigh letters and parcels.

I step up to the couple. Tara is reading *Watership Down*. Her handbag can't hold the hardcopy version so she carries it around in a fraying, green Harrods plastic bag. She pretends the bag is a coincidence, but probably believes it's excusable if the plastic bag is from a reputable London store.

The young boy is in school uniform of a similar colour scheme to Tara with an awkward rectangular box on his back.

Tara chucks her packet of crisps into her handbag and attempts to walk past me without greeting. This is the moment when I get to be the hero.

"Tara..." I say, but her bared teeth cut me off. My eyes gravitate to her pancake belly, as my father did to Marie's on my wedding day. I suddenly regret not holding my wife on that day with the intimacy that I should have.

"Charlie?" she says. A speck of spittle has flown from her tiny mouth. Her tongue wiggles in her throat but struggles for the length to protrude past her lips. Confidence is slipping. I tell myself: she contacted me for help. Before that I had no intention of pursuing this.

"Is this a new boyfriend you've got?" I say, nodding at the boy.

“It’s none of your business,” she says, enfolding the boy closer. My astonishment must show because she softens, releasing the boy who almost gasps for breath. He scuttles outside by order of the girl.

I compose myself by concentrating hard on frowning. I browse the birthday card rack. Ewa’s second Big Day is approaching. A train for a girl?

“Charlie,” she says, her tone measured. “Don’t worry.” And for a second I believe her.

“Your message said you wanted help...” I say and trail off. This works on Marie – it breaks her to apologise. But Tara is neither guilty nor perceptive.

“Your father is free, isn’t he?” she says. I nod. “Well then.” I look through the window at the boy with the satchel box. Up to this point I’ve taken for granted the dominance I thought I had over Tara and now it’s vanished.

“I’ll say the baby is his,” she says, pointing to the boy with her bag. “It’s not illegal for me to change me mind, is it now?” she says and clatters out of the shop leaving me with a choice of a train or a ladybird on the birthday cards.

I choose the ladybird. Hoping the card will explain my entrance and the £2.45p will be enough for the woman behind the scale to stay quiet.

## Chapter 16

Herb and I form a sullen partnership on the couch next to my Gran's empty recliner. My father and Joyce have taken my Gran to the park. Herb and I weren't invited.

It's over. I'm flapping the Post Office birthday card between my palms, like I'm looking for the cheap option on a menu in an expensive restaurant.

Tara will wander off away and won't bother us again. I feel sick having to trust her, but this is ultimately the scenario where my father gets away with what he's done and the family (Marie, Joyce, my daughter eventually) never find out.

I feel heavy from the secret, perhaps a little superior. I need to maintain my tenacity for the pantomime in which a man is not only loved, but worshipped. I can't ignore that I feel hollow from losing Tara as a dependent. She changed so as not to need me.

Herb has his paints spread out on the table. The London skyline is ready. And I think of what would happen if I didn't return to the capital – would I become like Herb, painting within someone else's lines in colours that I need to have verified as correct?

Marie hasn't contacted me. She hasn't reached out to discipline me for my absence or phoned to check how I'm coping, if my mind is fretting. I've never stretched defiance towards her for this long. It feels like I'm storing up a fantastic comeuppance, a true show-down, one powerful enough to eradicate everything. But I've learnt that you can't depend on these apocalypses to happen.

Together Herb and I chomp through a plate of biscuits and when there are pink crumbs left he fetches the split cellophane packet and we snatch straight from the plastic tray – a sight never experienced at 18 Farmwalk.

I pick up a Rubik's Cube. Someone has taken a screw driver to this one: the plastic has been marked in places, the stickers shifted and put back on skew. It taunts me with each loose twist. It's been fixed and then re-scrambled – so should still be fun – but the overt cheating has me less inclined to try and solve it. Or look for the thin volume of instructions I've seen around. It's just rickety and an occupier for my hands.

I leave Herb to go to the loo. I flush and the water rises. It pools upward more and more like an optical illusion. A thin slick of scummy water slides on to the linoleum. I stand dumbly until the water laps up against the rug carpet in the hall.

The doorbell rings. Doctored for a deaf person it startles me enough to withdraw the broom from the toilet bowl. The plumber has maintained anonymity by using the bell and that's good business. The consistency of your knock can prematurely reveal your mood.

I look through the glass panel beside the front door. At first I don't recognize him. His fists are clenched, one around a bag, and the other involuntarily by his side. In tracksuit pants he steps up and down anxiously waiting for the door to open wide enough for him to slip through.

I think of what a hollow man Goodwin appeared to be in court and how much worse he appears now. He rings the bell again and it is shockingly loud at this close proximity to the front door.

I can't imagine letting him in. He'll destroy me, smash a beer bottle on the drinks counter and gouge it into my neck.

I open the door and we stand across from each other much like we did when I visited his house with Joyce. The rims of his eyelids are like cheese grated raw. His face is bloated with fatigue worse than I saw in court. When he blinks it lasts a full second too long.

"I'll ask the boss to send someone else," he says.

"No, don't do that. The house belongs to my Grandmother," I say. "The guy, the man, he isn't here," I add, before Goodwin can ask.

I suddenly realize that I need this: for Goodwin to glare at me and be comfortable. In a male egoist fashion it is Goodwin that can bring me peace. Just as you ask a father for a girl's hand in marriage I need to know that he's okay, so I can be.

He steps over the threshold. We are both fathers, I think. We must both fear that we will grow old and let slip our failings to our daughters.

I show him through to the bathroom. He asks me to step away from the loo for a second while he does an inspection. He wades in the correct footwear.

In seconds his head is over the bowl as if he's vomiting. On all fours he turns back and is precarious in his balance, his ass waving in the air as a baboon's would.

Goodwin is probably under the misconception that because he doesn't enjoy his work, he'd be happiest doing nothing.

He prepares a glove that reaches to his shoulder, thick maroon plastic so his dexterity is mostly impaired. He plunges into the over-flowing bowl, the water displacing further, soaking several millimetres of carpet so his entire arm can find room.

Goodwin's rummaging stops. His shoulder is solid. He tilts his body so his ear is almost touching the toilet water.

"How do you feel about the outcome?" I ask, seconds before he's about to get a purchase on a mass of glossy paper. This question on the trial forces Goodwin to lose his tyranny on the mashed paper. He turns to look at me.

"It was blown out of proportion, wasn't it? Kids don't know their own minds, that's the pity," he says and resumes his original depth.

I remember the ten black toes on my father's computer. Would you be more discreet with the girl you were truly planning to break the law with?

Ultimately the father needs to know. If that was me, I'd want to know. That's the point. But am I willing to sacrifice my father, his reputation, all that effort of mine out in the world?

There's a muffled sucking sound, Goodwin's knees look unsteady. He rises and presents to me a mangled mass of sodden paper. I recognise a photo or two from the articles. They're from the *Reader's Digest*, in its glossy, compact format. That's what was clogging the toilet.

He proceeds to remove eighteen and a half issues while I develop a serious awe for the British sewerage system. How does it stomach so much paper?

Goodwin, by the end, is not satisfied. He looks at me like he wants an explanation.

“Magazines. Always bloody magazines,” Goodwin says. “You say your Grandmother lives here?” He drops the mess into the bath, over the plughole. I nod and he sneers as if that explains it.

“I’ll finish up here,” he says. “You could try to have a word with your Grandmother on this, but it’ll cause a ruckus.”

“Mr Goodwin...” I say and I think I’m going to be my Gran walking out into the driveway towards the police at 5am. But I can’t say a word to Mr Goodwin. I can’t tell him that he’s going to be a Grandfather. Pulpy with magazine, Goodwin sloshes over. His face is grim and threatening, but, with macabre interest.

“Why do old women do this?” he asks, raising a fistful of magazine. Goodwin will discover Tara’s baby soon. I have orchestrated a situation where it will continue regardless. Tara is a juggernaut, a rogue member of the harem. I see Goodwin in his dining room with Tara wondering what to do. I wish your mother were here, he’ll say.

Goodwin and I are in similar positions – we are both waiting for normal life to be resumed. But the empathy I’ve felt for him since I arrived here up North has evaporated. Once he discovers normal life with his daughter can never be resumed he will become a menace to my family. I think of the midget

boy with the satchel on his back and realize Goodwin will never believe that such a pipsqueak is capable of being a father, just as I don't. He'll understand Tara is lying and come back to butcher us with a rage that I can appreciate. I would do the same if Ewa was involved. This man needs to be neutered.

"What is it all about?" he asks, the water lapping at his Wellingtons. His hands are idle now, smeared with magazine print, but will he wait for Ewa to reach a ripened age and have his way with her? Will that be his long-term strategy of revenge?

"Who knows," I say, resolved on what needs to be done. My family needs to be protected. Goodwin paddles a few steps back towards the bowl in the water. He's like the witch from *The Wizard of Oz* melting into water.

I pay him out of my wallet. There is a sufficient tip. He stumbles out of the unlocked front door. His van's engine thankfully turns over on the fourth or fifth attempt.

I reach for my Gran's hard pack of menthol's. Light one. This is what gnawed my Grandfather's belly to death – plus the eight years in an asbestos factory after the war. Dr Canker wasn't entirely to blame.

I hear the family trundle through the kitchen door. Agitation thumps in my chest. I am dazed as I slump into my Gran's recliner, having fiddled with the controls to align me close to horizontal. I am inert. Swelling as a dead body does from fermenting gases.

Herb looks nervous, but I hope this won't affect his proclivities: he has a slick of water and magazine grime to mop up in the bathroom.



I don't go out to greet my father and his adjusted harem. I lay in front of the widescreen.

I hear Joyce ask her brother if he'd like a cup of tea and the subsequent drone of the water distiller. She's at a point where his eccentricities have become cute.

My father has a puppy Labrador in his arms. It's the same breed as Prince, but golden instead of black.

"How did it go?" I ask. Joyce doesn't answer. My Gran, unable to settle, opts for the edge of the armchair. Joyce goes to prepare a tray of tea and coffee for the entire household. At an earlier time she used me as a foil to sift her thoughts, to check her conflicts and confusions: if what she was thinking was appropriate. Now her features have a stern clarity. My father is perched in his usual seat, his ears pricked up.

"That girl, Tara," I say. My father lights a cigarette and crosses his legs, tight at the crotch. The smoke curls up around the light fitting.

My father shows no reaction to her name, dragging to the same depth on his cigarette. "Her father, Mr Goodwin, was here this morning," I say, extracting myself from the recliner to put on a CD. I took a few discs from my father's collection at the cottage.

The CD begins to skip. It's stuck on *A Day In The Life*.

"Can you hear that?" my father asks, flipping his head around, almost sniffing the air. I nod.

"It must be an old CD," I say and push forward to the next track. The CD stops.

“Dad. I’m not cross, but I know what happened in the car,” I say. “And there’s something else. She’s pregnant.”

The relief is fantastic. It feels like I could float out of this recliner. And here I am in control of the situation. Goodwin and Tara just lost all their power over us.

Joyce moves for her coat immediately, taking it down from behind the door. She layers dramatics over her genuine surprise and guns me with a sweetly satisfying hate. “Stay Joyce, please. Sit down.” And she does, retracing her actions in slow motion. I suddenly realize it could have been a mistake including Joyce.

“How do you know this?” she asks, almost comically.

“She won’t have an abortion,” I say, ignoring Joyce’s question. “She tells me her story to everyone will be the father is a boy from school.”

“She told you? Why?” Joyce asks. Suddenly there’s an accusation in her tone, as if I shouldn’t have this knowledge. What is she implying that I’ve been trying to do?

“You’re the one who wanted to meet with the girl,” I say, turning it around on her perfectly.

“You’re right,” she says, quietly.

“Now, Dad, I want you to be safe. I’ve told you this because we’ve got to be prepared together, as a family, for what might happen. There is a possibility that Tara will put the blame on the boy and we’ll never hear of it. Or she might...”

My father doesn’t react directly, but he is becoming tetchy.

“Can you hear that?” he says again. Before I answer, he steps over to the window and studies the frame. He slowly scrapes the lock mechanism up and down, lowering his head millimetres from it. He licks his finger and dabs at the window frame, tasting the tip. His eyes widen. His face becomes a full English breakfast.

“The taste of sweet roses,” he says, “your mouth full of thorns, your gums bleeding. My lord.” He puts his hand to his mouth astonished, sucking and tasting his fingers like they’re smeared with bitter chocolate.

At first I think that there’s blood in his mouth, from a nick off the window frame. But he licks and smudges, wiping the invisible blood on the curtains. “I’m glad I shaved my beard otherwise it would be pink, or black. That’s the colour of blood in hospitals,” he says. He looks down at his fingertips as if they are spread with an indelible ink. It reminds me of a drag-queen checking the tenacity of his mascara.

Next I imagine an ostentatious, manic break-out, screaming seizure, but he collapses quietly. Like a suit being lowered so as not to crease it too badly.

I go over to catch him, but I’m not quick enough. My elbow collides with his neck. He doesn’t release a sound. I cushion his head as I imagined doing to Tara after she had fallen drugged from her stool. His eyes haven’t closed, his mouth is hissing and slurring.

I place a heated towel on his forehead. The stitching of “Holiday Inn” on the corner is beginning to fray. The two of us lie on the filthy carpet as I try to pinch my mobile out of my jeans. It’s pushed fast against my thigh.

Herb and my Gran observe uselessly. I tell Joyce to call an ambulance.

We sit with him until the doorbell rings. It's like a spotlight being blasted through the flat, alerting the neighbours to what I've done.

## Chapter 17

My father has a private room – his medical plan is premium and in chronic surplus – but I’m forbidden to see him.

The waiting area has the shadows and tone of a hospice. Sparse lighting and sombre, clean doctors who say, “He’ll be fine, don’t worry”, even when you don’t ask.

The thin broth coffee, from the vending machine, isn’t keeping me awake so I’m forced to re-read this *Timequake* book by Kurt Vonnegut. I read it first when my ex-girlfriend Cath was at university. I read it to show her that I could read the same books as her, loaned from the public library, for free.

I put the paperback down, holding my thumb in place, as I stare at the pigeons tapping at the tiles outside.

“The stress was what did it,” the nurse said to me when my father was brought in. “He should take rests when he can feel the symptoms come on.”

“I don’t think he’s ever stopped to think of what the symptoms are,” I said to the nurse and my tone made her believe I was joking so she laughed.

When I called Joyce, an hour ago, she didn’t answer.

I decide to fetch more coffee and chocolate nuts from the vending machine.

On my return I hear Richard calling for me to hold the lift. This is Joyce’s husband.

I hold the lift open longer than I should and it screams a beep at me. The

metal pushes against my spine.

“Charles, hello,” he says in a whisper.

“How are you doing?” I say and shake his hand.

“Joyce is still speaking to the authorities,” he says.

“What? Which authorities?”

“I assumed you knew. She told me you were the one who sat them down and told them of, you know?” Richard can not say the word. “You know, what happened.”

“She went to the police?”

“She’s taking it very seriously,” he says.

Within the hour my father is cuffed to his bed. It took three separate doctors’ signatures to enforce this restraint and it is amazing to peek through his circular window and see the chain against the metal bar of the bed. I can’t ignore that the image brings me some personal relief. Seeing my father in manacles next to crisp sheets is like seeing his sickness and actions finally overlap. It is the satisfying image of his lifestyles being forcefully intertwined in reality as I’ve always tried to do in my mind.

I’m stunned at Joyce’s actions but, I have to admit, not surprised. I’m not angry. I feel like I presented a sensible strategy and she ran off the deep end with it. I am innocent of incriminating my father and I feel a smug satisfaction that Joyce could not be trusted with information regarding Tara, just as I predicted.

When I think of Marie knowing about the baby I start to worry. But there is a surrealness to that future conversation which I can't embrace at the moment. There is also a teasing hope that if she can endure this infraction then we can relax and be happy together through anything. We will have passed an incredible test.

Richard and I sit next to each other in the waiting room. There's gravity to him as if he can't understand how my family tolerates looking him in the eye. He has accepted working off his guilt in favours and hospital visits. It's a carbon emission write-off programme for his rape of a minor.

That minor is now 48-years-old and outside on a balcony of the hospital, pinching at a cigarette she's begged. She knows that after twenty years of abstinence and brain changing drugs, prescribed by her Market Weighton GP, the fag will only satisfy her with nausea. The blood rush as she inhales will put strain on the Eastern European sections of her surgery.

Joyce hasn't said many words since she arrived at the hospital. There's an entourage of attention-seeking behaviour about her, a handbag flapping against a chair, saliva popping from chewing gum. It's as if the love for her brother is being unravelled.

She identified with Tara and must feel like she's given a voice to a poor, mute girl, at the cost of her own brother. But also Joyce couldn't let her brother walk deeper into retirement, oblivious of what he was. She didn't think the favourite son deserved to be absolved. She strove to shatter everything because she couldn't let an old child molester be happy.

“You can go in,” the nurse says to me. Richard beckons to Joyce. She crushes the filter with no concern for the large section of cigarette left.

Joyce stands as self-consciously far from Richard as she can manage. My Gran believes that Richard is Joyce’s first and final chance. He was a friend of the family and an actuary. No matter the age difference, or the scandal, my Gran could put Joyce in focus when she looked at her through the prism of Richard.

When they separate next time Joyce won’t go moaning to her mother in Market Weighton, she’ll cry silently out on a fire escape – so as not to incriminate him for future family Christmases. You have to treat parents as if your relationship has a narrative: a separation will lead somewhere and their emotional investment in all this small talk has purpose.

Joyce covered her incident with marriage. Richard the past molester turned husband turned provider became impossible to demonise.

Here she is making a stand against such a crime without Richard saying a word.

My father hasn’t disrupted the sheets: whatever drugs they gave him weren’t homeopathic. His breathing is controlled from the diaphragm. My father’s face is quiet, but the right side is persistently slouched, from dragging the dead face weight around for years.

While he’s unconscious Joyce holds his hand. It is a beautifully fake representation of their friendship. I can see from Joyce’s furrowed brow that she’s doing incredible social equations. This is a watershed for her. She is



reconciling how she's struggled in the past with this recent illegally grim era. I hold my breath, curious for him to wake at this moment and break the epiphanies.

I step up to the bed. There isn't room for us to stand beside his torso together. When my hands touch the handcuff I have disbelief that I can leave him here to collide with Tara and the police. He'll be trapped in here to rattle around.

Richard stays by the door, not wanting to be under my father's scrutiny – even though he's unconscious. Richard edges closer in to the room. He doesn't hold Joyce's hand but stands close.

I notice that I'm expecting to get a nervous call from a young girl any second, but I have yet to hear her tiny voice.

The police arrive and we're asked to step outside. It's only one officer – the local plod. The same man who was at the Griffin the night of the misunderstanding. As he removed the handcuffs from my father's wrist he recounted the story to us with a Northern, small town understanding that we would find out eventually anyway.

After Joyce reported the rape to the authorities Tara was taken immediately to a clinic and examined. I think of Tara being confronted at her home by policemen and part of me feels that I've contrived a tad of justice for payment of her taking advantage of me.

Tara's clinical examination revealed a broken hymen and signs of a recent abortion. Someone had removed an homunculus, a fully formed drop of a man as Brenda would have you believe, in the past few days.

The girl stuck to the claim that the ex-baby was the product of the boy with the square satchel. They were in love, she said. There would be talks but no charges were necessary, because he was 12. Goodwin contested the paternity, but the young woman stood firmly by her story. This was the young pipsqueak he'd be eating Christmas dinner with in years to come.

Tara, I believe, has lied to save my father. As quickly as Joyce uncovered the truth it was rudely buried. Tara didn't want a sisterhood of abuse. She wasn't appreciative of middle-aged women fighting her battles.

Joyce weeps on a plastic chair in the hospital waiting room and Richard holds her. The old man offers comfort with a functional duty.

It's like our family has been put back together, but in a rush. Everything is ostensibly the same. It's a quick slam of the BMW's door, but it's like he has given us tabs of acid and we've been stripped. Flushed out. Purged is the word that comes to mind. The ego gone. Tara's cover-up should rewind us several hours to when my father was free, perhaps weeks to before the trial started, but I crave to venture back a few minutes to the hospital room, when the handcuffs were on. This is when the world felt solid to us. And instead we are at none of these points. We've become strangers to ourselves.

I follow Joyce and Richard outside. The couple cast a single shadow across the E.R entrance. I feel contractions of guilt, like I've committed a succession of crimes here. We stand illuminated, each with our head bowed.

I am ugly and juvenile, lacking texture, like the muscle of my experience has eroded.

I wonder if Joyce is jealous of how Tara is dealing with her trauma. Joyce can't change what happened to her and she can't rewrite what she learnt from it. The thought of this trollop 12-year-old recovering faster, being enriched with deeper layers, must upset Joyce. I wonder about this, because secretly I hold a respect for how Tara handled the situation. I would like to see the kid again, to check up on her, I think.

I raise my head finally and Joyce has already done the same. She got to attempt a revenge on her brother. This must have a touch of cathartic significance. A few quiet seconds later she's waving from the passenger seat as Richard drives her away.

"Without the cuffs my father could wake up and wander out of the hospital," I say to the anaesthetist. "He's done it before. I need to stay. He'll get on a bus."

The anaesthetist sends a nurse to where I've pushed a blanket, stolen from my father's room, across three plastic chairs. The nurse assures me that there is no chance of my father escaping.

"He might not regain consciousness for days, perhaps weeks," he says.

The handcuffs on the sleeping vegetable man have been unlocked and reclaimed but there's a red ring around his wrist where they were clasped shut.

## Chapter 18

Marie sends parcels. She'll stick a post-it note on the top of my mail bundle, with point-form lists of what she's been doing. To illustrate she'll cut out a newspaper article and circle, with a marker pen, the areas of interest. She'll include one that she enjoyed and one that she thinks will titillate me. The articles will be from different papers, sections, with opposing political slants, but the effort is gratifying. I Blu-Tack them around the cottage.

My father's 5-star coma persists. The hospital texts me with daily updates. Replying to them is part of my routine.

When I got down to London I told Marie the story, unleashed on her how this meant my father was guilty. She'd been right, I told her. We hugged and went to bed. The next morning we ate breakfast together and each went to our places of work. When she arrived home that evening she said she felt uncomfortable. And two days later she confessed that she didn't think this feeling would go away while my father remained guilty and free. I protested, but she was resolute in her thinking. Her look of sad disappointment was what drove me out.

"This makes a lot of sense," she said.

"What?" I said. "What, Marie?" But she didn't need to answer – there was a feeling that our relationship had been exposed. She was the child, the bulimic sufferer who needed parenting and I was the adult who got cross and set the rules. In our own diluted, suburban way we felt as perverted as my father and his girl Tara.

My father's cottage was empty, as my father was in the hospital, so I moved in. As for personal effects, I asked Marie for the toaster (which she never uses because she's wheat intolerant) and a print of our mutual photos. For a second I wasn't sure if she would part with the appliance. I thought she'd argue that a guest might fancy a slice, in the morning, for breakfast. But she realised that this was a point of maturity. As for the photos, she said, I could take the laptop and the negatives.

I am scared of what I'll tell Ewa when she's old enough. Perhaps her mother will tell her the truth: I lied every day we were together. "Co-dependence isn't love," she'll say to Ewa as she reaches her teens.

My reasons for my daughter will need to be dedicated and loving, while I incorporate a touch of victimhood.

At the pub men offer sympathy. They talk in gunfire bursts. Divorce. Mondays and Thursdays. School pick ups. Every alternate weekend. It's hard. Very hard. And then I shudder under these four words: "What's the kid's age?" So now, the divorcer has to defend himself. An 18-month-old baby is involved? No excuse will diminish the air being sucked through their overbites. I tell them I've fitted an orange plastic seat to my father's bicycle for the baby, for when I ride us to the shops.

I had a boring day job, but stayed to pervade its every cranny because I got a kick out of being the smartest man in the room. In this cottage I am still the smartest man in the room. Though, I'm beginning to suspect that organising my boxes of cutlery and books isn't going to settle this emptiness. But, also, I understand that's why I don't nest, because it's good to feel that the cause of

my problem is administrative. It would take a full evening to sort my summer clothes from my winter jumpers. Once that feat is done, what then?

Brenda brings the baby up with the toaster, my diaries and the Microsoft Machine. I offered to drive down but Marie urged that I didn't. It would be too painful, and needlessly expensive, she said. I said I have money. She said: don't come.

The cleaning lady I employed solves my procrastination. She has little respect for privacy barriers. She scoops around the diaries, as if sensing they aren't to be enjoyed, goes into the box of photos and hangs them up.

The Microsoft Machine I place on the desk where it was yanked out by the police. I have the info to contact her – to be sure that she's okay. I toy with sending one email, but she's possibly fine, busy with school.

We visit the Zoo and Ewa sleeps in her pram. We talk about my father, about his future, more than we ever have.

Brenda tells me that men need to learn how to be solitary. As a woman, she says, you do this by having children and a home. That capacity to spend long stretches with no one to talk to and no opportunity to break the silence. Radio DJ companionship.

She says my Gran is deeply concerned and asks after me. I can imagine Joyce defending me, and this, more than anything, depreciates my mood.

I have yet to buy a bigger television and with the photos lining the walls – swamping the tiny cottage with their gilt frames – I find myself spending hours absorbed. My nose is a few centimetres away and I scrutinise the faces: my

father in a Speedo, which he would wear then without a qualm, waving. I try to remember that we were all kind of miserable. I try to let myself be okay with that, because I know that I'll have a chance to create new photos. Not necessarily better ones, or happier ones, but more.

Boy, I think, peering closer, we truly do look ecstatic. In my mind Marie will always be sitting in her wedding dress: the same day, plenty of different poses. Mostly pretending to be doing what she's told. I remember how she was eating some sort of food on a cracker, guiding the crumbs up her chin into her mouth.

It's dark when I arrive at the cottage. I've been walking from my Gran's house after one of Herb's packet dinners.

I think, at first, that somehow I left the cottage's front door open. And, it seems, left the lights on. Without Marie around, I think, that is certainly possible. Then I see the word "rapist" written in pale blue down the left side of the BMW. This is the vandalism I wanted, I think. It's the blaring advert that would somehow incinerate my family's shame. And I almost feel proud that it's out there for everyone to see.

I reach out to touch the "p". It doesn't smear. I've heard lipstick is a stubborn compound to remove from paintwork. The handwriting is similar to how my Gran marks her cheques.

I lean for support against one the disabled railings. There's a roughness in the air. The cottage is brighter from the outside than I'm used to. The curtains are drawn, over the unlocked windows. I think that it must be internal: a tumour

pushing against my optic nerve, brightening my vision. This is it, I think. The lesions I've been waiting for.

After blinking a few times I see that there has been more external damage done here than scratches to the BMW's paintwork.

I open the cottage's front door. The cute stairs, the ones you need to jump two at a time, I register are more orange than usual. Our possessions have been scattered, but not as viciously as when the police had their way.

I ramble into the flames, grabbing at CD cases. It's hot and frantic. Terrifying, but I let loose. My lungs and throat shake as if being tapped into the grief of the world. I've always stood above, not empathising. Now kids have torched the cottage and I want my photos and diaries and the items of clothes Marie bought me one birthday and one Christmas at a time, especially the comical T-shirts that are stained with paint.

The front door collapses inward and a neighbour pulls me out onto the mud. He looks irritated as if I am the cause of this, as if he knows I'm someone who tries to assign blame and I should bestow it on myself.

The neighbour's wife says that what I need is a cup of green tea, that's how you calm down. I phone the fire brigade, which is difficult and alien until they say they've already received a call for that emergency.

I slump down exhausted. I don't realise how mechanical the weeping is until it stops. I blink and chuckle to myself. It is as if nothing has happened.

"What was that about?" I say to the cat. Tears are streaked down my face as the mud by my feet hardens from the warmth.

As is customary, I phone Marie. The ringing stops too soon for it to be



voicemail.

“Hello?” a woman’s voice says. I stare at the BMW’s windscreen, not through it, but at the tiny faults and marks that can’t be washed off. “Charlie?” she asks.

“What made you answer the phone this time?”

“It was a mistake. I didn’t have a chance to check who it was. I’m waiting for a call,” she says. I ask her if she’s busy. I can hear that she’s just trying to get through the conversation.

“What are you laughing at?” Marie asks.

“The car was vandalised,” I say. “They wrote down the one side.”

Suddenly she is willing to put our drama aside and listen to my story, patiently, perhaps offer a smidge of advice. “It’ll be cheaper, I expect, to spray the entire vehicle instead of the single door.”

But, as I’m about to explain the fire and how the professionals are arriving, I have a premonition. Our future is going to be pivoted around catastrophes. It’s only then that I’ll get licence to sulk, to pull her down. When I hear that she’s cheerful I’ll try to build my situation up as excruciatingly pathetic. This is what I have always done, angle my situations, but now I’m going to have to fight for the attention at a distance. The only weapon I have is pity – preying on the fact that she won’t hang-up on a man who’s trapped, weary and lost.

“I need to come down to London,” I say, “to fetch a few pieces of furniture.” The fire engine explodes its hoses.

Marie opens the door with a slouch hello, still hurrying with the keys. There is a jangle as she attacks the locks, unpractised at the ritual. She is wearing a hideous, bobbly, itchy red jumper – a new garment that she must have picked purposefully: not wanting me to be bereft with nostalgia at the sight of a familiar blouse.

“I slept in my clothes,” she says, I think to asexualize herself. The mention of prepping her naked body with lotions would be too scintillating.

I miss curling up on her shoulder and feeling safe. I don’t realise this until I see her.

Of the women that are attracted to me I see similar facial patterns. This is without my intervention or choice. It’s as if the universe only allows certain women in my proximity. I don’t feel like I’m ever making a decision, so coincidences appear rife, the world becomes a pattern of girls with the same prominent jaw, plucked skinny eyebrows, while I stand as an observer. Not flirting or lifting a finger, forced to go where they take me.

I walk past Marie’s photography. Most of the shots are of homeless people standing wretchedly outside expensive coffee shops. These are not as conspicuous as the gaps left from the photos pulled down. The tacks are still on the wall.

Two uniformed men help me shift a desk, a bed, a lamp and a cupboard into the removal van. Marie will need to find a man to replace this furniture. My reclaiming is basically inviting her to do so. I can envision her remarrying a guy called Ted. He would be jovial and frame every anecdote as a challenge, expecting you to guess the crucial number of deaths, dollars or bricks relevant

to his story. You'd have to turn in a guess so he could continue. Shrug off his challenge as rhetorical and he'd force you to narrow it down. Get in the ballpark and he'd congratulate you. It would be macho audience-participation brought to your own home. I guess though, by that stage I won't legally own my home. And my daughter will be forced to motivate arguments over getting a belly-ring as if on a game show. I am jealous of this imaginary Ted, not for the physical woman he'll covet but for his potential to make her happy.

I trudge into the bathroom and a new heated towel rail has been installed. It is plugged into a power outlet and overflowing with towels. This independent DIY renovation unsettles me.

I flick my hands dry and check the small bathroom bookshelf. I thought I owned every book in the house, but Marie has a collection which I must have ignored as the filler around mine.

I move to the edge of her bed and check the bedside tables. Why wasn't there chaos, I thought? Why wasn't Marie tearing the wallpaper off in splendid sheets?

I slide out a *Harry Potter*. She has written her name in the front cover. I donated my music CDs to Marie, which upset her, I think, because she's taken the time to write her name on each of hers. There's biro on the individual discs so now two or three tracks are scrambled, usually the singles, which are invariably the ones she likes the best.

While pushing *Harry* back into the shelf I note a *Divorce for Women Manual* snug between two map books. I'm upset that she's gone so far as to buy a book, but there is nowhere for my frustration to go.

I open it, not considering this to be prying. Yellow selected phrases flick out at me. She's taken a highlighter to it. She has sat over at the dining table practically sketching out the necessities, knowing that she can puzzle herself through this divorce, provided she has a punch and plenty of ring-binder-strengtheners.

I ram the book in deeper than it was before and walk into the kitchen. I should have taken more of a stand with the decorating of this house. My departure is seamless. Marie is pottering around nervously. "Nice haircut," she says. Yesterday I went to a hairdresser for the first time in eight years. The same barber as my father.

"Thanks," I say.

"Are you heading back up tonight?" she asks, raising her plucked eyebrows. She used to say eyebrow plucking was her favourite therapy.

"Staying at Brenda's," I say, trying to smile, but I'm stooped over, grotesque. "How are you?"

"I feel neglected," she says, "but it's not your problem." This is exactly what manipulation is: forcing yourself to be installation art, to be looked at but not touched. Marie and I stand in silence until she starts to count on her fingers.

"...three, four. It's four," she says.

"What am I supposed to say?" I ask, knowing that she's referring to the number of weeks that she's been bulimia free.

"Nothing, of course. Praise leads to deception," she says. This is on the assumption that if I show an appraisal for a certain action then her incentive to lie will out-weigh her need to sustain a healthy practice.

“Well, then I won’t say anything.”

“Charlie, that’s kind of your thing: being unassertive,” she says. This is a shock. I blink several times. What I hadn’t realised, until now, was how many opinions of me Marie had refrained from voicing. My attitude is to try and build walls and distance. It’s cruel because it means you give the other person limited ways to respond. You hide their tools before they’ve decided if they want to use them. Of course, these years Marie had been silent to keep me from exploding, having a break down, succumbing to madness, as per Gareth her therapist’s instructions. But I saw, as she twirled her tea towel and flicked it at the cupboard door, that this separation, this divorce, must feel like her project is failing. As much as it does to me. It would have been our grandest stretch of common ground, this selfless preserve, and I was noticing it in her on our final meeting.

## Chapter 19

On Saturday morning I stand under the Christianox cross. It is plain wood – no morbid, broken Catholic Jesus.

I was told by the Minister before the service that he bought it as a Catholic cross from a sale and actually removed the effigy, sanded down the wood. His wife sewed a gown for the Jesus statue and he painted over the blood and chopped off his eagle-spread arms. Sure enough, a robed, sombre Jesus is the welcoming statue in the foyer.

The Minister's wife is proudly handing out the programmes as people enter. It's a photocopy of the readings and hymns for the morning's service.

Tara hasn't arrived. I sit in the corner, at the back. The York faction Minister is performing his sermon and the crowd is attentive. The Minister twitches and bobs. Genetically he's shaped like a ferret. He's well-spoken and has taken the trouble to cut out a fake gallows and hang it around his neck to illustrate how "wacky" a crucifix is to non-believers. He has a cardboard electric chair and rifle on the podium but I'm not sure time will allow all three.

I watched the sun rise over the freeway this morning: from the footbridge where the homeless drink and threaten the cars with rocks. I said aloud to myself "this is so clichéd" but I couldn't bring myself to leave until it had finished.

The congregation stands and Tara enters. She takes a pew as they hammer into song. The toneless enthusiasm of the crowd is helped by her arrival.

When the singing stops I notice, defensively, that a few of the congregation members whisper to each other. It must be about Tara, I think. It's not the spreading of facts that maligns me, but my father's complicated saga being stripped to a few headlines.

I worry that strangers are trivializing my life. I should be allowed to convey the preferred tone. It's my hardship: I should have the licence. Not that social pressure bothers me.

"Let us pray," the Minister says and their heads dip, possibly less readily than they should.

The Christianox ministry, I've read, doesn't teach forgiveness. Unlike the Catholics they believe that we go into the world with our eyes open and intend – even if unconsciously – every action that we commit.

"Mighty Christ," one of the faces whispers at the back.

"Mighty. Mighty Christ," says another. The Christianox auditorium is bright: I can see every spongy face.

Tara pays no regard to the congregation. I stare at her throughout the service and she counts the freckles on the back of an old man's neck.

Upon the next demand for the congregation to stand she tries to vanish. I see that she's slim, definitely without child. She's wearing a conservative, yet flowing, dress. She looks like a tequila sunrise. There's a temptation to paint her as a distrustful bitch, but then they are all like that, right Dad? In my head his imagined opinions have gone quiet. That space is empty.

I bought a dead rabbit from the Griffin pub last week. They sold them over the bar for five pounds. I was told the flesh would be dark and, from these

fields, juicy. The barman pointed out where I should pierce the fur. In the cottage's garden, by the chicken coop, I cut down the flank with a knife from the kitchen. At first I thought what I was seeing was entirely normal. The smaller rabbit looked so cosy in the cavity. The rabbit I'd bought was pregnant. I was unable to disrupt the two sleeping animals and so I went back to the pub to buy another, unable to explain why. I was embarrassed that I could eat one kind of dead rabbit, but not another. The second rabbit I slit open on the patio and it looked absurdly incomplete, like there was plenty of space, too much in fact. I stewed it with potatoes.

The damage is in Tara – it's in her stride. If revenge is measured with lasting pain, then my family has sufficiently infected this girl. I try to catalogue the invasion my family has caused, how we've trooped over her. My father and I have gotten our finger-prints on the quiet, intimate events of this girl's future. Her abortion and the physical interrogation by the police will corrupt the grand announcement of her pregnancy, when it comes with true intentions.

Joyce said that after her experience with Richard when she was a girl she developed heightened senses. Like those people with brain damage who felt like dogs. They saw smell as colour. The world had another, sexual dimension for her that no one else could detect.

But in return for this damage Tara has clearly started to become an adult. Not in the false way of a few weeks back, but as if she has learnt to accept and live with her weaknesses. There's vulnerability but she's not afraid to expose it. This confidence will protect when she's up against a sexually fractured man like my father in the future.



For my trouble Tara has shown me that I'm not going to be as good a father as I thought. I must have appeared to Tara like the oblivious kook who wanted to capture the glory. She probably laughed at my attempts to protect her, but I hope she finds salvation in a carer that she at least respects. She shouldn't have had to fumble through this on her own.

"Please notice the collection box at the back of the church," the Minister calls out as they stretch and natter like a crowd that's been silenced for too long. He reluctantly fingers the cardboard handgun on a string. "Next time," he says. "It's good to pace the dramatics."

## Chapter 20

The cottage is brush-coated with a freak bout of late snow. The neighbours have attempted to cobble together a snowman. To give it bulk they have resorted to scraping ice off the top of the blue Ford in the driveway. There are scratched finger-marks across its roof, as if someone trapped outside has tried to burrow their way into the car.

My father slinks down the path. He's balanced as if swinging a gigantic tail. Distracted by the snowman, he walks over and adds two handfuls of snow from the bonnet of the Ford to the effigy's concave head. He pats at the snow, rounding its shape with his gloved hand.

We face each other, at twenty paces. He gestures for me to go inside as if what he'd just done in the neighbour's front yard was completely natural.

Since he moved out of the hospital and we've started living together somehow I find it easier to believe he impregnated her. The physical sex is impossible to imagine, though I feel that he's capable of more offspring, but only by Immaculate Conception.

I flick through my laptop bag, hanging off my shoulder. There is no computer inside, but I produce the folder of multi-coloured letters. My father puts them under his arm. I follow him into the lounge and he's already slipped the letters into a drawer. He is gazing off to the side, concentrating on the skirting board.

The cottage is moderately cool. I make no effort to remove my coat or scarf. My father automatically puts the kettle on, fiddling with the lever under his bulbous gloves.

There are new curtains – not freshly purchased, but dug out of a box not unpacked for years. They are dark yellow and ragged, but do the job. The stairs are destroyed, but the house is structurally intact.

The weed orientated press clippings have been burnt off from around the cottage. The Blu-Tack has stained the plaster.

When he has drained his tea he gestures with a wad of his hand-written pamphlets.

“Your Gran politely bought me a set of pens,” he says. No outlandish colours: black and blue. He asked her for writing paper, preferably without a letterhead. We’re going to bomb the neighbourhood with them.

Out on the path he plucks snowdrops from his garden and tucks them, one at a time, into his tweed jacket pocket. He looks like an obvious jester who is about to squeeze water from his fake plastic flower.

Predictably there is to be no Microsoft Machine for this campaign – he hasn’t questioned or fretted over where it went. He is hand writing the 10,000 advertisements personally. If the ratio is maintained from his last attempt, then he’ll get a seat. What I notice of the pamphlet is that my father’s handwriting has neatenened, suggesting he has a steadier head for government. The content, though, is much the same.

My father does not stop for lunch in public and I didn't have the foresight to pack sandwiches. He steadies himself at the zebra crossing. I don't perceive him as old enough to have a hip that could break from falling the distance of his leg.

"I have avoided therapy, especially as I have gotten older," my father says. "It's not necessary for insurance men: this new fangled rubbish. Men I've seen have become thinned out by therapeutic sessions," he says. "They all tend to arrive at the same nirvana, actually. They are a generation of the same man copied. Over and over. They are like Buddhists, which I don't know too much about."

"It might be helping," I say. He's in sessions three times a week. It will finally take advantage of his ridiculous medical package.

"Do you know how difficult it would be to drink 50 pounds sterling of whiskey in an hour? That's how much therapy costs," he says.

The father I want is dependent on me, that's our currency, and now he isn't. There's a speck of food on his face. I reach up to scratch it off and he lets me.

He rams a pamphlet through a letterbox before it clasps down on his hand. We have enough pamphlets, with such a sparse arrangement of houses, to be doing this for a stretch of days.

We stroll further and I see the melting dump of a snowman and realise that we've done a full circuit. He strides up to his neighbour's front door, past the snowman, and slips a pamphlet through the letter box.

Ironically, I think, our strongest similarity is how dumbfounded we are with a male friendship. The identification is built precariously around our insecurity towards each other. Both my father and I are comfortable with the demarcated rules of women. We're not womanisers, but we're both guilty of overloading the women in our lives – squeezing every demand onto a wheezing partnership. You don't need to struggle for a lady to listen and she's always there, until she's not.

It's clear that we don't trust the women we surround ourselves with. We are always suspicious and distrust, like hate, flattens people out. Who knows what Joyce or Brenda or Marie are really like?

"I've got plans," my father says. He believes he's cured and getting established.

There is a boy negotiating a spade in the garden when we return. He employs his entire body weight onto last night's frost. The kid stomps hard with both feet, riding the spade like a pogo stick.

"Is that the community service boy?" I ask. My father nods. He passes me a mug of hot liquid. The unstrained leaves have created a green soup.

We stare at the 17-year-old as he gets on his hands and knees to claw at the weeds in the shrubbery. He was caught vandalising several cars that night of the fire. Apparently he caused havoc across the town, writing all sorts of words on several cars in the village. The reformatory sent him here to begin his community service. My father is a free citizen, a pensioner, and should not have to endure such vandalism. Our house was the only one he set alight.

I look at Prince the dog and Derrick Applegate's tiny gravestone and think of when the first father of my peers died. I realised that over the next twenty, maybe thirty, years this will happen to everyone. Though I imagine it's easier the older you get, I expect the commiserations get less emphatic. People give affection when they don't know what to do, but once they've been through a few funerals they would rather be terse than clichéd.

At each funeral I've attended I've stood and reflected on my own father, in my own world. I've listened to the platitudes yet transposed them to my own family. When I know a friend with a father who's died I can't help but think that it must be a relief. What you've always known to happen has passed and you can assess your reaction. I can't help but think, through my friend's grief, how much lighter the world must be. Harder, less amusing, more lonely, but less cluttered.

But a gravestone for my father wouldn't solve anything. He would still be here – energised, decomposing, spreading his influence in a fragment of ways. For the saga with my father to be over I would have to be a different person.

The next major event between the two of us will be his death and we will stand with our backs to the audience. I've untangled myself so I can be next to him expecting nothing. I don't have to avoid him or change him. The lesions will dissolve, break down like slugs doused with salt and we will stand happy and relieved with just a puddle of gritty sludge on the floor.

I stagger into the cottage and plop into an armchair that has newly placed doilies on the arm-rests. I hear what could be the mewling of a kitten. My father's usual deliberate movements are accelerated. The cat struggles into my

father's arms, squirming to get up and on to his shoulder. Besides this the cottage is cold, the air stagnant.

He says the girl next door, the one with the snowman, has keys and has been visiting to lay down food. I've seen her, she can't be older than 14-years-old. I look down at the yellow cat food bowl. Crusted scales of old food are left hairy and clinging to the bottom. I shake in a handful of organic biscuits, tempted to overflow it.

I try to conjure up the "disgust" people must be feeling, that we all must be feeling over the actual event, the trial. I should be more concerned, that's what I should be: more concerned with what he's done. It is terrible what he's done. Ghastly. But really I'm hurt more by the smaller things he did to me than the atrocious things he did to Tara. I pretend somehow that the abduction was simply what he was picked up on, like a mob boss that made an incidental slip that got him sent him down for a history of abuse. Honestly, I was jealous of the abduction accusations, they put his other crimes in to bleak insignificance. It was better, for me at least, to think of them stacked all together and written off as one. I pretend that the trial was for all the crimes he's done his whole life, for the terrible things he did to Brenda and his family. I think of my father screaming at a man with cancer. Yelling. The trouser button deliberately undone. His own father. It's a haunting image.

Tara forgave my father and moved on. She has set an example for me to do the same.

My father and I sit in silence as his multiple clocks in unison count us down. There is nothing I can do to stop the snowman girl from getting a few years older. There is nothing I can do to stop my daughter from growing up.

The cat flap is not yet fitted, the moulded plastic frame is still in its bag with a receipt, but a hole has been rudimentarily sliced out of the back door for the animal to escape.